Aleks Severin

Folk Horror

Your Knees Still Bone

Multiple POV

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Excerpt

From the tall cornfields they came—children with horns on their heads, led by a sacred purpose: to make sure that Margareta Brekker dies.

They come under the cover of night as moths, as two-headed lambs, and as slaughtered cattle. Some are even human, bent backward and crawling with wide eyes and grinding teeth. Now, Greta faces a choice: trust the stranger and his miracles, or find the strength to reject them. Because the flowers are sick, and it takes only one sick plant to start an epidemic.

Time: Autumn

To those whose first haunted house was their own mind.

Aleks Severin

The Poppies have Knees January 2026

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The Guide Book

Let’s take this opportunity to thank you for consid-ering membership. Henrik approved of membership, so you are given the Membership Handout. In this handout, you will be told about the “do’s” and “don'ts.”. Your enjoyment depends on how well you can follow these rules.

Do’s.

- You will be required to work within or without the gates during the week. All outside work must be supervised.
- You are required to give notice of any sickness or injury. You will be accompanied to the hospital; do not go by yourself.
- You will be required to keep a smile on your face. You must be required to smile on command. It is what we call “maintaining your happy face.”
- Always accompany visits to the city
- After prayer, you will only rise when given the command from a supervisor.

Don’ts.

- Don’t drink alcohol.
- Don’t speak of gods.
- Don’t speak of miracles.
- Don’t clap your hands.
- Don’t eat at places that serve alcohol.
- Don’t speak vulgarities.
- Don’t listen to music.
- Don’t smoke cigarettes.
- Don’t consume drugs.
- Don’t associate with those who consume drugs.

- Don’t watch television without supervision.
- Don’t enter movie theaters.
- Don’t enter erotic movie theaters.
- Don’t own mobile phones that have access to the Internet.
- Don’t read the newspaper unless your supervisor allows you to.
- Don’t read books until you are allowed to do so by your supervisor.
- Don’t walk barefoot in the huts.
- Don’t paint your nails.
- Don’t parallel park.
- Don’t walk by schools.
- Don’t raise your voice when around the farm.
- Don’t close your eyes when singing.
- Don’t bring visitors until the supervisor tells you to.
- Don’t take pictures.
- Don’t put cash into offerings.
- Don’t attend churches outside of the farm.
- Don’t bring or consume chocolate on the grounds.
- Don’t sit cross-legged.
- Don’t let children play with "tools.”.
- Don’t tilt your palms toward the sky.
- Don’t wear anything that is unstitched.
- Don’t ride bikes.
- Don’t start a relationship before checking in with the supervisor.
- Don’t back-talk.

- Don’t give excuses.
- Don’t attack those in authority.
- Don’t question authority.
- Don’t celebrate holidays except ours.
- Don’t talk to people of other faiths.
- Don’t give gifts to others until you are under authority.
- Don’t celebrate Christmas.
- Don’t celebrate Easter.
- Don’t go fishing.
- Don’t wear earrings.
- Don’t wear V-necks
- Don’t wear enticing clothing.
- Don’t imitate an air guitar.
- Don’t whistle.
- Don’t click your tongue.
- Don’t make animal sounds.
- Don’t wear stockings.
- Don’t wear jeans.
- Don’t wear shorts.
- Don’t wear sleeveless tops.
- Don’t wear caps.
- Don’t go swimming.
- Don’t let your hair get too long or short. Check the manual for length.
- Don’t interview for a job unless under authority.

- Don’t buy property without checking in with Ben.
- Don’t buy a car without checking in with Erik first.

And most importantly, all of these rules are bullshit — sincerely yours, Maks

Polly Put the Kettle On

And it came to pass that the morning star lifted his countenance toward the heavens, and earth darkened as the skies parted and consumed every crevice of earth. No ark shall save, for this is the beginning of one. — Ezekiel 6:16

CHAPTER 1 — GRETA

Tyssedal, one year later.

The empty milk carton stared back—Sandra’s smiling face, 8 years old, from Stavanger—frozen in plastic eternity—while downstairs, something wet and hungry gnawed at the floorboards where she had screamed four months earlier. Norway didn’t put missing children on its milk cartons. If they did, Sandra might have been worth the 100,000 Kroner Returkartong Lottery jackpot.

Outside near the orchards, trees stood like giants against the mountains, the color of two-day-old snow.

Greta hadn't moved for what felt like hours, a half-empty glass of milk growing ice cold in her hand.

A thin, angry line of red already beaded on her index finger, a gift from a jagged shard of ceramic she'd been too distracted to clear away. Greta watched the blood bloom, feeling a numbness where the string should have been.

She didn't see the shadow peel away from the dark beneath the table. Brunost, her ginger cat, usually a silent, purring presence, now moved with an unnatural stiffness. His tail lashed fast, and then, without warning, a low growl rumbled in his chest, rising swiftly to a sharp, spitting hiss.

It was a sound Greta rarely heard, a warning she usually didn't pay mind to. But she was the only one in the kitchen, her eyes wide, startled by the raw ferocity. She flinched. Involuntarily. The glass slipped. It caught the glint of the dying light before it shattered against the light blue tiles.

Milk exploded across the ceramic tiles. But it wasn't white, not for long. The blood from her pulsing finger dripped into the puddle, swirling into the stream like a blooming, red flower. Greta stood frozen, watching the pink stain spread, her own pulse thumping in the wound. The chill from the window was replaced by a deeper, colder dread that seeped right into her bones.

Then, beyond the swaying stalks, she saw it: an impossibly tall silhouette standing motionless at the field's edge. It was too dark, too starkly defined against the greying sky to be a trick of the light, too still to be an animal. A shiver caged her spine.

She scrambled for the outdoor faucet. The water was cold, washing the red down the drain but it couldn't wash away the hammering in her chest. When she looked back, the field was empty.

The polished tiles beneath her feet were cold—a temperature that seemed to leech the warmth not from her skin but from her bones. She was already halfway across the hallway when the bolt shrieked.

Her head snapped around instantly. The figure was there again.

He was framed against the gray, fading light of the late afternoon. It wasn't Maks. It was one of the men hired for the dying stretch of the orchards—a late-season necessity Maks had muttered about, though it seemed too late for saving anything. The man stood on the threshold, a heavy presence that seemed to warp the air around him. Greta couldn't tell if he brought the damp chill of the mountains with him or if he was pulling the feverish heat behind him—like he was sick.

The living darkness of the house claimed him instantly. As he stepped inside, the shadows swallowed his features, leaving only the vague knit texture of his cap and the impression of a face.

She had spent weeks counting time by the drift of the dust motes in the attic, never bothering to learn the names of the ghosts Maks brought onto the land. To her, it was simply 'the guy from the orchards' or 'flower boy' if she felt particularly salty.

He eased the door shut with practical care, as if he were afraid of waking the house itself. Greta's gaze remained fixed on the floor, her stomach twisting into a hard knot.

The souring scent of milk was already in the air, failing to mask the metallic tang of the ceramic shards.

He hadn't knocked. He had simply appeared from the heavy fog on the threshold as if the damp air had called him into existence. The disheveled curls shadowed his face, leaving only the impression of a man of dirt.

"Do you need anything?"

The question landed too softly, muffled by the damp weight of the kitchen air. He did not look at her face. Instead, his gaze was anchored to the wreckage at her feet

Greta felt the man's shadow first: tall, dark, and smelling faintly of raw earth and sickly-sweet bruised apples. She stared at him as if he were an apparition, or perhaps the only real thing in a world that had finally, violently, made sense.

Her voice was hard, sharp, like made of glass itself. "What?"

He chuckled but the smile didn't crinkle his eyes. "I asked if you needed any help with that."

Without waiting, he dropped to one knee, settling into the pool of milk as if the mess didn't exist. The sight of him kneeling there was more suffocating than if he had stood towering over her. He began to collect the pieces quickly His large, rough hand reached into the mess, not for a broom, but directly for the sharp shards. He collected them piece by piece, treating the shattered ceramic with the care one might show a gemstone.Greta watched him pick one shard up, one after the other. It drove her further away from the impulse to react. She brushed her hands off her apron—a futile gesture that did nothing to wash away the sudden realisation that he wasn't just cleaning.

"I'm fine," she lied, the words quick. The shards were gone, the floor clean by his hand, but the sickening, cold weight in her gut remained.

He looked up then, meeting her eyes for the first time. A single blond curl fell over his brow as he held her gaze—a stare that didn't just hear the lie but dissected it. He knew exactly what kind of "fine" she meant. In that moment, the memory of the flowers tugged at her again, the phantom pulled at her ankles making her wish the earth would open up and drag her back under.

Greta squinted as she leaned closer to Elias, her tone dropping conspiratorially low.

"Are you one of the..." she breathed, her head inclining slightly toward the high, vine-choked wall that kept the world out. "You know, the sick ones?"

Elias went still. He kicked his boot heel against the stone, then swatted a moth from the counter with a violent snap of his wrist. He frowned; a flash of momentary offense flickered across his face, gone as quickly as it came, replaced by a dry, hollow chuckle.

"You mean patients of your late father?" he corrected, his tone shifting to something smoother, more dangerous. "No. I'm visiting my uncle, Jasper Elster. The landscape architect." He shrugged, his eyes glancing back to the silhouettes of the trees outside. "But he told me about them, about how the homestead isn't about cures but containment. A place where the rules are...flexible. I really like the concept." He paused. "I'm Elias. Orchard worker., Not sick."

He extended his hand, his left hand, the others still heavy with the glass, a gesture of greeting as familiar as breathing. Greta didn't move. She simply held out her open palm—-flat, stiff and expectant.

Elias' brow creased, a flicker of confusion sharpened into the edge of annoyance.

"That's how we greet each other here," said Greta, her voice stripped of any human warmth. "To make sure you're not hiding any weapons... and to make sure you're clean."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you're Bliss," Greta snapped, the word dripping with disdain. She crossed her arms, a tense barrier between them.

"Bliss?" He turned away from her and threw the shards into the bin. "What does that mean?"

Greta's breath hitched, and for a moment her mask of indifference seemed to crack. For a second, something raw—anger, maybe—flashed in her gaze. "It means you're not from here."

Elias, clearly a little taken aback, nodded slowly. He mirrored her gesture, offering his own palm. When Greta's hand descended, the contact was a shock—-palm meeting palm, skin on skin. Her long, cold fingers closed around her hand, tight. Her smile, when it came, was thin. It didn't feel like a greeting.

"Margareta," Her voice was a whisper. "Not an orchard worker. And certainly not Bliss."

He was right about the control, realised Greta as she bit her lip until she tasted blood. She hadn't known it before, but it showed in the different approaches her uncle and father had taken. Now the homestead was a cemetery, only inhabited by those too broken, too faithful to leave.

Elias' voice was rough, barely a whisper when he spoke up again. "Would you have a glass of water for me.... *Polly*?" His hands, caked with dry earth and faint smudges of grease, unconsciously scrubbed at his jeans as a desperate gulp worked its way down his throat.

Greta drifted from the shadow. She returned with a glass, her fingers cold against the sweating rim.

"Polly, really?" she repeated, but nothing in her eyes showed him it was a joke. Her fingers, cold as stones, pressed against the wet side as she handed it to Elias.

“You look like her. From the Couture magazine you have over there? Polly?” He took the glass, a strange chill spreading up his arm as he pointed toward the stack of magazines. "Thanks," he managed, his voice a quiet rumble in his throat.

Greta's eyes watched him without blinking, refusing to comment on it. She hadn’t even touched those magazines. They were Karina’s. "Did you see someone in the fields earlier?"

Elias frowned, and she could tell he was hesitating. "In the fields? Like, the farmworkers? Or are you worried about your cat again?"

“My cat?”

“Brunost, your husband told me about it.”

“He’s not my husband,” Greta said, her voice a steadfast line.

Elias shrugs and Greta watches him, her frown deepening. "So you didn’t see anything out of the ordinary?"

Elias shook his head. He didn’t just set the empty glass down, he slammed it onto the counter, violently.

"No," His voice was final. "Nothing. Your cat stole an apple from the box when we were pruning and harvesting the last tomatoes. That was it. The strangest thing."

He stared at the wall behind Greta, his eyes dilated and a bit too wide, as if he were trying to convince himself into believing his own lie.

Tomatoes, thought Greta. In this cold? How strange.

Movement caught her eye. Ben was standing at the window, his mouth fogging the glass. A slow, soft knock tipped against the glass. Tap. Tap. Tap. Greta froze, then hurried outside, fear tightening a knot in her stomach.

When she shoved the door open, Ben had already walked there. She moved in slow motion. But before she could even pass the threshold, his hand shot out and pulled her closer.

His fingers clamped around her wrist with bruising force, jerking her forward until the breath left her lungs and her chest slammed against his.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her words feeling small in the air.

Ben's hand shot out his fingers clamping around her arm. He yanked her away closer, then back, as if checking if she was solid. His eyes, dark in the dim light, bore into hers.

“Where were you?” he hissed, his breath smelling of rot. “I’ve been standing right here for five minutes, calling out. Five minutes, Greta. What were you doing in there that was so important you couldn't hear me?”

With a sudden, shocking jerk, Greta ripped her arm free. A cold shiver ran through her marrow where his skin had touched hers. Her eyes narrowed, fixing on him with an intensity that made the edge of his sneer falter.

"I was talking to Elias," she stated, her voice flat.

She gestured toward the kitchen, the space still filled with the smell of spilled milk and Elias’s strange presence. But when she turned around, the room was a graveyard. The counter was empty. The back door open. The glass gone.

The casual arrogance drained from Ben’s face as he blinked. He let out a short, hollow laugh, then shook his head, trying to reassert his control over the moment.

"Who the hell is Elias?" scoffed Ben, the name sounding like an insult.

The name hung between them, spat like an insult. "The orchard worker?" Greta’s voice was a sharp whisper in the dust-choked room. "The one Henrik recruited?"

"Why would Henrik recruit someone?" Ben’s voice wasn’t a question, it was a sharp threat.

The rules of this place were simple: no outsiders, no unknown variables. Henrik knew that. Ben knew that.

Greta shifted, her fingers twisting around her bracelet. "Maybe he was one of the garden apprentices from last year," she offered, her tone thin with false surety. "Maybe Henrik asked him to come along to help with the winter blooms. It’s nothing, surely."

If Erik were here, he would have known better. He would have known every flicker of communication the residents shared, every secret pact, and every silent agreement, if he didn't even make all of them. He had dedicated years to knowing.

"I would know if Henrik brought a stranger into the arrangement," Ben groaned. His teeth clicked, his jaw clenching so hard that the muscle in his cheek jumped.

"Then go ask him," she said, her voice dropping to a flat, cold calm. "He will know what to tell you."

Ben stared at her, hunting for a crack in her mask, a sparkle of empathy or a tell-tale twitch of a lie, but found only an unsettling calm. With a final, suspicious glance at her unreadable face, Ben turned and stalked out, leaving Greta alone with the thunder of a heart that beat too fast against her ribcage. It always betrayed her.

The moment the door fell into its hinges, Greta nudged the heavy wooden frame shut with her foot. The soft thud echoed, swallowing Ben’s footsteps. A faint smile touched on her lips as she leaned down to scoop Brunost from the worn floorboards. The cat purred, and Greta buried her face in the soft, thick fur, stroking the warm flank slowly and methodically, waiting for her pulse to stop its thundering.

Suddenly, Brunost went rigid. His tail stopped twitching, going perfectly still, and the slightest sound slid out of his chest—a high, dry burst of hatred. A warning hiss.

Greta didn't flinch. She stood there, pale in the light, her own face tightening as she watched the cat’s ears flatten. Her eyes, usually wide and empty, narrowed.

Then, she answered him.

It wasn't a word. It wasn’t a sigh. Her lips peeled back from her teeth, and the sound she released was the pitch-perfect imitation of the threat—only it was harder, rougher, the sound of human malice mimicking the primal hiss.

Brunost didn't flinch, but his whiskers trembled in a slow vibration. They understood each other in that terrible noise—like they shared a language. The cat froze mid-stride, his eyes dilating in alarm.

Greta could see it. His widened eyes, how his ears peeled back. Without a second thought, his body tensed, and he launched himself off the cool, tiled board where he'd been lying and bolted out of the kitchen.

A frustrated sigh left Greta. She kicked the back door shut with the edge of her foot, her eyes drifted through the kitchen until they landed on the cupboard near the floor.

She dropped to her knees. The hardwood was cold against the thin fabric of her apron, her shins growing cold at touch, hands fumbling with an almost desperate urgency inside the bottom cupboard. Her fingers brushed past dusty tins and forgotten spices until they closed around a coarse linen bag. Dried sunflowers. She ripped at the drawstring, plunging her hand inside, scooping out a handful of the dark, papery seeds.

Erik never got his funeral. Never got anything resembling peace. And Greta? She still choked on the salt and rot of it every single day.

She crouched down and lay flat on the kitchen floor, the chill seeping through her clothes. She stared at the ceiling, her breath shallow. It wasn't prayer; it was an experiment, a desperate, angry wail. She placed one sunflower seed on each eyelid, the tiny, rough discs pressing against her skin, blocking out the light. A self-imposed blindness, mimicking the darkness of the soil. And for a moment, there was nothing but silence and a rough piece of stem left on the sunflower that she had not properly cut. The silence was so thick it felt like the world had frozen—until a tiny bell rang out, sharp and sudden, slicing through the stillness like a knife. It was the only sound that mattered.

A bell rang. It was a quiet silver tinkle that Greta would recognize everywhere.

“What in the Lord’s name are you doing there?”

Esja’s voice, usually light, was edged with a weariness that spoke volumes about the state of their household. Greta didn’t need to look. She knew the sound by heart. It was not difficult, given the small bells that her friend had embroidered into the lace. She didn't respond right away. In a quiet, she simply reaches out a hand and patted the chilly hardwood next to her, inviting Esja into the dark.

Esja hesitated, her silhouette looming over Greta like a shadow. Then with a heavy groan, she dropped her bag. Without another word, she reached into the scattered pile of sunflower remains. She didn't take the seeds, she took two shriveled, yellow petals—bright as skin—and pressed them over her eyes.

As she lowered herself onto the floor, she let out a soft sigh that echoed too loudly in the empty kitchen.

"Are you going to tell me?" Esja whispered. The petals clung to her eyelids, taking her sight.

"Hysh," grunted Greta and pressed a finger to her lips. The skin was cold, the nail even colder.

"Are you praying?" Esja tried again, her hands resting flat on her stomach, a nervous habit.

"No," groaned Greta, a sound of pure frustration escaping her lips as she let out a long sigh. Her voice was stiff and dry. "Don't you want to know what it's like? To meet him?"

Esja went still. The only movement was the fluttering of her eyelashes beneath the yellow petals, making the dead flowers look like blinking eyes. "Do you think there will be silence? A black hole of nothing?" She lifted her hand, her fingers clawing at a stray auburn strand that she tucked back.

"Why do you care?" Greta's voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you want to meet him already?"

Esja's head tilted against the hardwood. "No," she breathed. "But if I'm gone...who will pull you back out?"

"You're not gone," said Greta. It sounded final.

As she spoke, her fingers briefly touched her skin.Her face contorted into a frown, so severe it looked like her skin might tear at the seams.

"But yes...I think I once did," bit Greta out, the words clipped and cold. She pushed herself upright. "Met him. You know?"

"What?" Esja's question was a reflex. "Greta, when?"

Greta let out a scoff, a harsh, ugly scoff that was devoid of any real humor.

Impatience flared in Esja's eyes.

"At the diner, and then later," says Greta finally, her brows furrowing until it looked like a fold. "Weren't you with us?"

Esja shifted. Her clothes brush against the floor like pillows. She rolled onto her side, her eyes wide. “No, we were waiting at the correctional facility, Ben, Kristian and I. We were waiting at the gates for hours.”

A hand, surprisingly steady and cool, settled against Greta's forehead. The simple, immediate contact momentarily anchored Greta, putting the loudness in her mind to silence. “Are you ok?” Esja breathed.

Greta blinked, her gaze unfocused as if she hadn't heard Esja's question at all. Instead of answering, she rose fluidly from her seat, a strange determination settling on her features. She moved to the kitchen counter, where a ceramic bowl sat waiting. With controlled ease, she poured a considerable amount of milk into it, the white liquid swirling like a storm, catching the light.

She returned and placed the bowl between them on the floor. Then she plunged her hands into the milk and began to stir. Her finger moved through the white as if searching for something at the bottom of it.

Esja reached out, her own hand still wet with milk, clamping down on Greta’s hand. She squeezed her fingers painfully as her knuckles whitened underneath the pressure. The cold, sweet scent of milk clung to Greta’s skin; it was nothing like the burning ache she felt inside.

“You are not sick,” Esja hissed. She squeezed Greta’s hand so hard the milk overflowed the bowl, splashing onto the floor like wet paint.

Greta didn’t fight her. She simply let her head loll, watching the world blur as if sinking underwater. The idea of the Tethered not being there was the only real delusion.

“You are not sick, Greta,” Esja repeated, her voice turning as hard as stone. “I swear to the Lord you’re not.”

It wasn't a comfort but a command, a desperate plea, as if stubborn will alone could banish the shadows that clung to her.

"Are you sure?" whispered Greta, her voice tight.

Esja nodded. "I don't see anything. No one's here but us."

Greta’s breath hitched. "But I do, Esja. They were right there, by the fireplace. Their eyes... they were so hollow." She whispered, pulling her worn bracelet tighter as she leant closer. "And that sound? It's getting closer. It's like something's trying to claw its way in."

Esja’s gaze flickered to the window. Outside, it was black. "Maybe you're tired. We've been through a lot."

"No," insisted Greta, her gaze darting to the window and locking onto the glass. "It's not me. Don't you feel it? The wrongness? They're watching us. They're waiting."

“Who’s they? People? Corn? Flowers?”

Greta's gaze hardened to metal, fixed on the rain streaking the windowpane. The drumming of the drops was a rhythm, though it wasn’t calm. Instead, it dragged her back to Henrik's house—to the room that smelled like suffocating velvet and hid the cloying scent of the monstrous floral arrangements. She could still feel the phantom grip of the wind around her ankles, the way the petals seemed to coil around her legs—pulling her under a silent, screaming darkness where every gasp was swallowed. How she thrashed against them but fought in vain. How darkness swallowed it all—how it fed on them.

Esja’s fingers dug into Greta’s chin, forcing her to look away from the glass. “Are you seeing men?” She demanded, her voice stern. “Or are you just seeing the stalks and the wind?”

"It was never the flowers, was it?" Greta whispered. She wasn’t looking at Esja, she was looking at the way her own reflection seemed to be peeling away from the glass, reaching for her.

Esja’s voice cracked with a snarl. Her hand reached Greta's shoulder but snapped back, as if Greta’s skin was scorching. “We all saw the man behind the trees.”

Then, the sky spat something.

A blur of rust feathers hurtled towards them. There was a dull thud. The glass didn’t break but it groaned under the impact of the robin's body. It didn’t bounce off, it crumbled. Its hollow bones snapping with a sound like dry twigs, and it slid down the pane, leaving a smear of blood behind. Greta didn’t blink—until more of them came.

A flurry of robins flew past the window, a blur of rust and brown against the gray afternoon. One, either bolder or simply more clumsy, misjudged its flight and crashed into the pane with a thud. Glass cracked.

The window shrieked in the frame as Esja yanked the sash open. The cold air fills the cramped room with the scent of damp soil and approaching snow. Esja reached out and scooped up the shivering mass. In the lamplight, the bird looked less like a living thing and more like an organ. Its chest heaving in shallow movements.

She held the small creature in the dim, flickering lamplight, the bird's shallow breaths barely disturbing its twitching form.

Esja's voice was a whisper, reaching for the bowl on the floor, only to toss it into the sink. "Is it still alive?"

Greta stepped out of the shadows. The light caught only the edges of her face, leaving her eyes in the darkness. She looked down at the dying creature, acknowledging the empty energy that still lit up the tiny chest. It was alive, yes. But it wasn't a bird anymore. It was a fragile spark that was still clinging to a wick that had already drowned in oil. The movement was not a sign of a fight, only the miserable failure of a machine that refused to quit gracefully.

Without a flicker of hesitation, Greta's hand darted forward, her fingers closing around the robin's throat. There was a faint, terrible snap, quiet yet total, instantly absorbed by the room's silence. Greta dropped the limb bird onto the windowsill, the feathers now lay flat and greasy against the wood.

She turned her gaze toward Esja, her eyes reflecting nothing.

"Not anymore," Greta said. The words were flat and final.

Esjas's mouth hung open. "That was a robin, Greta. You... can't kill a robin, you know what— you know what they say. You know what it does. The curse—"

"No," Greta interrupted, her head tilting as she turned to the stairs. "I'm not doing that anymore. I am done with omens. I hate birds, robin or not. They saw things."

Greta stood up straight, the dust motes dancing in the single, piercing shaft of light that cut across the kitchen floor. She slapped her palms against the coarse, homespun weave of her apron pockets and bent down. She didn't look at the bird again and merely scooped the small, cold weight and shoved it deep into the dark cave of her apron's pocket.

Esja took a trembling step forward, her boots groaning on the kitchen tiles. "So what will you do? You can't just.... Keep it."

"I will take it to the cathedral," Greta stated. There was no comfort in her voice. Only something that she knew from her father... "Are you coming?"

The question was not an invitation.

Esja remained pressed against the wall, her fingers white as she dug her finger into the wood of the weathered column. She flinched as Greta moved, her head snapping toward the dark, open window as if expecting the rest of the sky to fall. With her mouth agape, her head snapped toward the window, then back to Greta.

"No," whispered Esja, the words splitting like wood in her mouth. "I... I still have the chores at the house with Karina. We want the house finished by dusk."

It was a pathetic excuse, and both understood the underlying fear—the fear of carrying such a grave payload into the unforgiving light. Greta saw the accusation in Esja's squeezed, tight eyes—like one would look at a rabid dog before the shot was fired.

"Ok. May the Lord guide you." Greta gave her a firm, meaningless shrug, a dismissal of both the task and Esja's cowardice. She nodded once, quickly, then stepped out of the loft and went down the unsteady ladder, leaving the silence to swallow Esja whole, the bird still in hand as she jumped down.

Greta hit the wooden floor with a heavy, dead thud and walked out of the door.

Outside, the wind was a fine, sharpened blade, slipping through the gaps in her thick wool coat and piercing the skin beneath. With her boots crushing frost-hardened weeds, she strolled along the overgrown gravel

path, her whole attention focused on the small, rigid creature she was holding. It was a terrible weight—too light to be meaningful, yet heavy with the silence of sudden expiration.

Her eyes were fixed on the bird the entire time. Its feathers, once full of life, were now dulled by an invisible dusting of cold, and the tiny legs retracted into a permanent pose of stillness. Its feathers, the colors of ash. Its tiny, clawed legs were drawn up against its belly in a spasm. Every instinct screamed at her to toss it into the grass, to let the soil claim it, but her fingers refused to let go.

Raising her hand slowly, she dragged the tip of her index finger across the robin's spine.

The sensation was shocking. It was so very, very cold. The feathers were not soft but rigid and profoundly cold. The temperature didn't just touch her skin, it crawled up her arm, settling into her bones like a curse. She traced the delicate curve where the wing met the spine, feeling the unusual smoothness of the chilled plumes. It was a morbid reminder that this delicate thing, which had taken off only hours before, was now nothing more than a hollow sculpture of ice and bone.

It was another bird, another mouth that would steal seed from the ground that was meant for the dead.

Her fingers closed, and with a flick of her wrist, it was over. No hesitation, no ritual. The body, still warm but utterly still, sailed over the fence and into the barren field.

The scent of crushed grass and wild clung to her clothes as she slipped from the sun-drenched meadow into the cool quiet of the church.

Inside, the air was thick with the ghosts of old incense and the faint, sweet smell of blood. She sank onto her knees in the front pew, the worn velvet a familiar comfort, and folded her hands to pray, pointing them downwards–for a second, the rafters had crossed her mind but she couldn't do that. That was blasphemy. The words died in her mouth. And all she heard was a thundering silence.

Her head snapped almost instinctively to the vacant confessional, the heavy velvet curtains hanging limp by its side, the ribbon unfastened at its midpoint. Like a mouth left agape.

She wasn’t here for the Lord. She didn’t want grace; she wanted the weight of a man. She wanted Lars. She wanted his words. His promises. His safety.

The thought of him, the quiet authority in his voice, and the unexpected warmth in his eyes when he looked at her filled the space so completely there was no room for anything else. Since he'd left them behind, she hadn't gone there to pray, and now it felt almost wrong to be there.

The silence of the church was a tricky matter, and Greta clung to it like lifeblood. Then came the groan of the heavy oak door, a sound so jarring it felt like a physical blow. Her prayer died on her lips, her head snapping up.

The light from the door was blinding, holy white and framed within stood a silhouette that turned Greta’s blood to ice. Her heart didn’t beat, it thrummed against her ribs like it wanted to be let out of its cage.

It was Elias.

He stepped across the threshold, and the heavy oak door swung shut behind him. The thud was soft, yet hammering in Greta’s forehead like a warning. In the soft light, a single, fat moth spiraled through the gap. It began to batter itself against the dark wood, its wings shedding gray scales.

Elias moved toward her. His footsteps didn’t echo in the surrounding space, they were swallowed by the stone floor.

Greta rose on her legs like they were made of water, an instinct taking over, telling her to run, to flee, to fight him. He stopped a few feet away. His gaze locked onto her, not onto her eyes, but more at her hair.

"I didn't come here to pray; I'm not that religious, really. Besides, I can’t really stomach it." his voice a low murmur that was louder than a shout. "I wanted to ask you about that burn."

Greta’s hand flew to the nape of her neck in a useless, near-panicked gesture over the mark she could never hide from him—the pentagram seared into her skin like a dark, eternal lighthouse.

Elias’s gaze snagged on the edge of her collar, where a puckered scar peeked out. His own hand rose unconsciously to his nape. “Your neck... that burn. What happened?”

Greta flinched, her hand flying to her neck as if to hide a secret she'd forgotten was exposed. The color drained from her face.

Seeing her reaction, Elias's eyes widened. He took a half-step back, palms up in a gesture of surrender.

"Whoa, ok. Sorry. I wasn't trying to—I ... the shape of it. For a second, it looked like a brand."

Greta swallows hard, her fingers fidgeting in the pockets of her milk-soaked apron before she finally meets his gaze. Her fingers fumbled against the weight of the dead robin. Her hand froze. Did she not just throw it away in the field?

"It's fine," she mutters, though her voice betrays her with a slight tremble.

ELias didn't push. He simply stood there, quiet, silent. Her fingers fidgeted with the edge of her headscarf, tugging it tighter like a shield. Hide it. Bury it. Just a little longer. But the words tumbled out anyway, hesitant.

"It's not a burn." She turned to face him, her teeth sinking into her lower lip before she corrected softly. She turned around to him, her gaze stretching along the pews. "It's a scar."

Elias' eyes widened. "How did you get it?"

A breath hissed between her teeth. The memory flashed like a physical blow that left her speechless, caged in a memory she did not want to relive—Kritian's careful hands tending to the wound last autumn, the ritual's sharp sting fading to warmth. Then Erik's death. The stillness afterward. No more sacred marks, no more whispered prayers. ... empty.

"It's a sacrament," she confessed, the words burdened with something like grief. Or longing. Strange, how much she missed it. "It was a long time ago; it hurt, but it's fine."

Elias steps closer, curiosity betraying him. As he tilts his head, a single blond curl slips free, brushing against his brow.

He doesn't push it back; he studies her with quiet intensity, as if trying to make out what "fine" really means. "Did someone try to hurt you?" he asks, his weight shifting.

Where would she start, wondered Greta. How Ben had almost choked her so hard in the cornfield that she suffered from memory loss even weeks after? Or how Dagmar attempted to drown her when she could barely walk? How had Lis practically sold her to their Lord? Where, wondered Greta, where would she start exactly?

"No," she snaps. Greta's eyes snapped up at him—wide, unblinking. She shook her head, her voice dry as rusted hinges.

"No," she snapped, the words exploding out of her mouth. "You should go."

The words hung in the air like a warning that the walls themselves could hear. Before Elias could answer, Greta bolted toward the doorway, her steps echoing in the hollowed space.

As she crossed the threshold, the pressure in her chest finally burst. A guttural, blood-curdling scream erupted from her throat, tearing through the silence with a feral intensity that made the vaulted rafters shudder. She didn't notice the tears that streamed down her cheeks, burning into her skin, biting on her bone, and shining, as if the very walls wept with her. The scream faded into a hollow whimper. Darkness didn't seep from the cracks in the floor, it rose like a shadow. The cathedral was no longer a sanctuary—it was a throat and it swallowed Greta whole.

Pop Goes the Weasel

To kneel before the morning star is to stand upon the pedestal of thine own making, for I represent the throne within you. — Jakob 8:14

Chapter 2: Elias

As Elias wandered through the tall, wet grass, it didn't feel like dew. It felt like a cold sweat that clung to his boots. He couldn't shake the dread that the people he passed weren't just secretive—they were hollow. Their smiles seemed a little too wide, their laughter a bit too loud, and their eyes a shade too intense. They didn't just look at him, they peered out from the bottom of a deep, sunless well, their eyes turning into the color of dead stones.

He sensed a strangeness coming from them, like a faint hum of malevolence that lingered beneath the surface of their polite facades. But as he sat amidst the withered greenery, whispering softly to the plants as if they were old friends, he couldn't help but wonder if they, in turn, viewed *him* as an oddity.

The thought crawled down his spine like an insect. Elias straightened his back, his neck prickling with the weight of eyes. But when he whipped his head around, nobody was there. Only the plants remained, leaning inward. Only they seemed to listen intently, their leaves quivering in the breeze as if they alone understood the strange confidences.

He turned away and retreated into the dark, red maw of the barn.

In the deepest corner, beneath the hay, his fingers caught on the edge of an abandoned box. Dust swirled in the artificial light as he pried it open, revealing a cluster of delicate corn dolls.

They looked hideous. Their tiny, handcrafted figures stitched from dried, yellowing stalks. Each one was bound at the ankles with a red hair tie, the fabric slicing into the corn, making the ends of the stalks look like blackened feet.

Each one seemed to hum with quiet life, their simple faces frozen in serene smiles. Greta's handiwork. She'd never mentioned them to him, of course. He brushed another sack of flour out of his way. Thick air hit his face, smelling like decay. He held his breath. Waiting.

He froze, his lungs burning. That's when he saw them: eggs, or what was left of them. A handful lay scattered in the dirt, their shells mottled and blackened as though burnt from within. A faint squelch drew his gaze. One shell had cracked open, and from the yolk, or rather the tar-like substance dripping with

foulness emerged a worm. Not the garden kind, but long and glistening. More followed, squirming out of other eggs, their movements too.... aware.

He recoiled, the heels of his boots grinding over parched earth, but the worms didn't flee. They coiled as if mocking him, their bodies shining in the dim light. Elias felt his pulse begin to flatten, not out of calm but out of a cold focus. He stared at the writhing mass, his nostrils flaring against a scent that was turning from rot into something metallic.

Suddenly, the worm closest to his boots froze.

It didn't just stop, it stiffened into a gray husk. The temperature in the barn dropped. In the heartbeat it took for him to blink, the creature was gone. There was no struggle. No slime.

In its place, a pile of ash. Not scattered, but neatly piled, as though it had never been alive. Elias whirled back around, wild eyes darting toward the doors of the barn quickly. All the worms lay lifeless, reduced to ash.

The eggs, too, had changed—now hollow, their rot didn't disappear, it paused, like the scene had been frozen in some moment of balance. From the corner of his eye, he sees a moth settling onto the worm, its feelers digging into the worm, wearing it as a second skin. It didn't flutter. It pushed its feelers into the remains, dragging the grey over its own thorax like a parasite. It wasn't feeding. It was dressing.

Elias cast one final look at the now dust-ridden worms, a final look at the coiling stench of eggs, and then he stumbled out of the henhouse, frowning. Behind him, the wind picked up, carrying the faintest gush of smoke.

Click. Click. Snap.

The egg's shells burst open, and the cracks widened, dried dust reaching out like arms from each of them. The shells shattered and from the cracks the moth's feelers reached out like fingers, dipping on the ground. They, too, turned to dust. One after another, until all that remained was ash and the faint flicker of mold—and one single moth fleeing into the rafters. Elias spun around, like a deer in the headlights, staring, waiting for anyone to draw out from between the shadows. But once again, he was alone.

As he stepped out from the darkness of the barn into a world that bled color. The air was heavy with a grim stillness, torn only by the soft crashing of the lake's water against its rocks. It was there, by the lake's edge, that he spotted one of the girls, her slender figure bent in concentration as she washed clothes in the fading light. As Elias watched, a glint of silver danced from her wet fingers, and her rosary beads slid silently into the dark water of the creek in silence.

Without thinking, Elias waded into the lake. The lake didn't feel like water—it felt like silk, wrapping around his thigh, pulling at his balance. He plunged his hands into the water that closed around his legs as he retrieved the beads.

When he drew his hand back, a shiver ran down his spine - the rosary had a small, tarnished nameplate, with the inscription "Lis". A chill bloomed in his chest as he realized that these beads had once belonged to the dead girl, Lis, whose fate still tore these people apart. The beads seemed to weigh heavier in his hand, as if the lake were still trying to drown them. Elias couldn't shake the feeling that he had disturbed something that was meant to remain hidden, and that he had pulled back a secret that was still warm and pulsing.

Elias spun again, the rosary clutched in his grip colder than the October air, its beads slick with something that clung—resin or blood—as if it had been submerged in the lake itself.

His breath fogged the dusk, his pulse a frantic drum in his ears.

She was here.

He could still taste the metallic tang of her voice, whispering his name beneath the splintered pines. But the shore was a wound sewn shut. No footprints in the mud, no ripple in the water's black glass. Just the wind, threading through the reeds like it was laughing.

Cold to the bone, his thumb now traced the rosary's cracked crucifix, the wood warped into a shape that didn't quite resemble a cross.

The beads grew heavier with every thrumming of his heart in his throat, each one digging into his palm as though resisting his hold. Had she ever stood there, clutching her own rosary, wondering if it's a snare? Or had the lake always been empty, and his mind had conjured her? A trick, a ghost it needed to believe in?

The pines creaked before he could ponder the question.

Something wet and root-like tugged at his ankles beneath the water's edge. Elias stumbled back, the rosary's weight now a rope around his neck. The lake swallowed the silence whole, the faint wind only a chill down his back. And when he dared to glance over his shoulder, the sigil grew warm, too warm, as if the thing dangling from his fist had a heartbeat of its own. She was gone. But the lake remembered.

Elias's fingers trembled as he fumbled the cigarette from the inner pocket of his coat. The match struck with a hiss, its flame trembling in the dead wind. He slipped the rosary into the pocket of his pants, carefully—as if it was going to burn a hole in it.

That's when she appeared, Maren, stepping from the shadows with the weightless grace of a moth. Her breath curled like smoke as she spoke. "It's dark season. We fast to bless the Lord. You can't smoke."

Elias's laugh was a dry rasp, the match flame guttering under his glare. "Last time I checked, I wasn't part of your... community."

The word curdled on his tongue, sour as rot.

Maren's smile didn't reach her eyes. Her braids, knotted with coated lichen beads, swayed like drowned kelp. "Sorry, don't say I didn't warn you."

Elias narrowed his eyes, the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. "About what? Your commandments? Not being.... bless?"

"Bliss," she corrects. Her head tilted, and Maren inhaled, her fingers brushing the pendant at her throat. "You don't understand." She narrowed her eyes. "When the season darkens the sky, the smoke... it doesn't vanish. It sticks. Lingers. And the things that follow it..."

Elias snorted, the cigarette finally igniting. The spark glowed against his lips. “Funny. I don’t see them coming for you.”

Maren’s smile faded. Her hand shot out, seizing the cigarette between two ice-cold fingers. The embers sputtered, snuffed like a dying heartbeat. “You’re not here for the winter,” she murmured. “But if you puff that sickly stuff, you’ll want to be.”

She released the smoldering shell, letting it fall to the dock slowly. It landed in a pool of oil-black water, unlit.

Elias’s jaw tightened as Maren turned to leave. “They’re hungry,” she called over her shoulder. “And you reek of trespassing.”

Elias groaned, his voice a snarl. “I work here.”

“And I live here,” counters Maren, flipping him the bird.

The wind shifted. Somewhere, a door slammed, not in the farmhouse, but out on the water, where the boats rocked in eerie, unshackled lullabies. Elias lit another cigarette, this time with a lighter cracked of use. The flame burned colder than usual, and for the first time, he wondered if the smoke had a taste, a metallic, bitter aftertaste that clung to his throat long after the match died.

Maren’s laughter followed him into the fog. “Next time, I won’t warn you.”

The cigarette in his fingers sputtered out with a dying hiss, its ash snuffed against the heel of his boot. He crouched, with the precision of something hunting. His palms pressed into the damp earth, scraping through blades of grass thick with dew. He brought the bunch to his face, rubbing it fiercely—over his knuckles, his jaw, the hollow of his throat—as if scrubbing away not the tang of tobacco, but the stench of something heavier, something wrong. A final drag of grass brushed his lips, then he spat; it was thick and pearl white, plopping into the soil like a sickened maggot.

The farmhouse exposed itself ahead, its windows clouded with dust and its porch sagging as if the wood had recoiled from the night. Elias moved forward, each step slow, his boots grinding against the pebbled driveway. The staircase groaned under his weight.

Up there, the door waited—peeling paint, warped wood, a mouth of darkness. He raised his fist, and knocked. The sound echoed hollow, swallowed slowly by the wind. He paused. Then came three more knocks, methodical, a rhythm. Somewhere inside, a pipe shuddered. A board creaked. Something shifted in the dark.

Elias didn't flinch. He remained a statue as the door groaned open, the wood shrieking like a dry lung. He didn't turn when the air shifted, bringing with it the suffocating stench of grave-dirt and iron—the copper tang of blood that had been allowed to steep in the dark.

He didn't know if he had walked these halls before, or if the house itself was simply conjuring his reflection from its floorboards, recognizing him as a part of its own decay.

He drifted into the kitchen. The dandelions on the tiles didn't just look like paint anymore, they felt like they were alive, reaching. The yellow petals felt unnaturally raised under his touch, like blisters. He began to follow the lines of the weed, his nails digging into the grout as if trying to unearth the roots beneath the ceramic.

The water didn't splash; it hit the bottom with a hollow, rhythmic thud that echoed through the house like a secret being hissed into an ear. Each swallow was a labor, the liquid cold enough to ache. He wrapped a heel of bread in a towel, the fabric dry and rasping against the crust.

Not soon after, he reached Greta's door and paused. He didn't knock so much as let his knuckles fall against the wood—as if reluctantly summoning her.

The door gave way with a slow, agonizing crawl. Elias stepped into the room, the bread cradled against his chest. He didn't look like a man bringing a meal; he looked like a priest carrying a heart to an altar, an offering to the ancient, starving thing that now lived behind that door.

Greta's eyes widened in a mix of surprise as she took in the sight of Elias.

"Is that bread?" Her voice barely above a whisper, as if the very word might conjure some malevolent force.

Elias nodded, his smile thin. "Yes, you can have it. Listen, Polly, I came to apologize for earlier. I didn't want

to upset you.”

But Greta shook her head, her eyes darting towards the window. “It’s all right.”

“Aren’t you going to eat it?” Elias’ eyes rested on the bread, then they flickered back to her.

"No, I can't," she whispered, her voice heavy with the weight of forbidden desire.

Elias's smile grew, his eyes glinting with a knowing light.

He nudged her with his elbow. "When you eat it in the dark, I'm sure your God won't mind.”

Greta's hands twisted in her lap, her fingers knotting into a prayer. "We're fasting," she protested, her voice firm, yet edged with a hint of doubt.

Elias chuckled, the sound so low and deep, she could swear he’d seen goosebumps on her skin. "Today is World Bread Day," he said, his eyes glinting with light. "October 16th, a day to celebrate. And I have brought you a gift."

The loaf of bread seemed to draw in her curiosity. Greta's resolve began to crumble, her hunger and temptation clearly warring.

And Elias, sensing her weakness, leaned in, his breath whispering against her ear, "One bite, Greta. One bite. Do it, and I’ll tell you a story.”

She frowns. “A story?”

“There’s a tale I want you to hear, Greta. It’s not a fable. It’s a warning."

"Another one about the Old Gods? Aren’t they all the same? Demons and doom?"

"This one’s different. It starts with a star—our kind of star. Not a god, not yet. Only light trapped in stone, falling. They say Ljos was cast down from the heavens, hurtling through the dark like a blade made of fire. But instead of shattering, it buried itself in the earth, asleep. For centuries, the world thought it was gone."

The scoff Greta spat was full of venom. "So it’s a ghost story. What’s the point?"

Elias ignored her words. "But the earth… the earth remembers. When the first roots dared to break through the frozen soil, when the first thing dared to sing… Ljos woke up. Not with fire, but with hunger. It hid,

though. For twenty moons, it crouched behind the corn, watching. Learning. A prophet came. Not a priest. A boy with golden hair, moss-stained hands and a voice like thunder."

He could see it in her eyes. How her curiosity was piqued.

She leaned forward. "What are you saying? That it... became human?"

"Worse. It became better. It wore the light. White as the snow, white as the river that cuts through the valley. It showed the townsfolk what they wanted, hope, peace, a future without shadows. It dressed in their prayers and whispered in the smoke of their fires."

"And the priests? They'd have seen it, right? They'd have—"

"They tried. They lit the pyres, carved sigils, and screamed hymns until their throats were raw. But the flames... the flames bowed. Ljos didn't burn. It grew stronger, feeding on their fear, their faith. The people... they couldn't see the lie. All they saw was a savior."

Greta's voice was now quiet, almost a whisper. "So it's a trickster god."

"No. Tricksters mock. Ljos... Ljos consumed. Total surrender. And when the priests thought they'd broken it when they'd chained it to a stone altar, bleeding it of its lies."

Greta held up a hand. "Wait. You said it couldn't be burned. How'd they—"

The smirk on Elias's face finally grew. "They didn't. A prophet came. Not a priest. A boy with moss-stained hands and a voice like thunder. He saw through the masquerade. Knew the only way to kill a god was with faith... but not the kind they'd offered. His kind was fiercer. Kinder."

"What did he do?" she asked, her voice nothing but a whisper now.

Elias leaned back, his shrug was careless. "He lit the world on fire. Not a small blaze. Every field, every rooftop, every breath turned to flame. And as the sky wept ash, he walked into the heart of it—all the while holding Ljos tight, as if it were a lover. Screamed its name until the sound split the stars. Dragged the monster down into the core of the fire, where it still burns. Still thinks. And if anyone dares to call its name again..."

Greta's voice was now trembling. "Will it rise?"

"No. It was always rising. The fire wasn't the end. It was... a pause."

For a long moment, only the crackle of the air fills the silence. Greta stares into the void behind the door, as if expecting something to leap out. Elias watches her, his smile gone.

"The funny thing about light, Polly? Sometimes it's not the fire that burns you. It's the hand that leads you toward it or the wrong berry that you eat."

"Wrong?" she asks, her word a scoff.

"Poisonous," corrects Elias himself. "I know all of them."

His fist clenched at his side. Bearberries. His eyes squeeze shut for a moment. Elias blinked hard, the room tilting for a second before a warm trickle ran down his upper lip. He touched his nose—red. Blood.

When he looked up, Greta was already there, pressing a folded napkin into his palm.

"Happened to me all the time as a kid," she said, voice soft, almost gentle.

Elias wiped his face, trying to ignore the way the blood smeared pink at the edges of the napkin. "Yeah? Doctors ever figure out why?" he asked, forcing a smile.

Greta tilted her head, a faint smile touching her lips.

"Oh," she said, "They said it was growing pains." She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "But I know better. It's when they start hearing you."

Elias stared at Greta, his eyebrows knit together. "They?" he asked, brows furrowing.

"The goats," she whispered, eyes fixed on the dark corner of the room where the shadows seemed to twist.

He blurted the words out. Too fast. "The gods? You're pagan?"

Greta's mouth opened, then closed—no sound came out. "No."

A faint, metallic scent washed over him, and his nose throbbed as if something was pressing against his skull.

He forced a nervous grin, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"Don't worry," he whispered, voice cracking. "They always come for the bleeders first."

Greta nods, her lips pulling into a thin line. “I know. I’ve been meaning to ask, can you show me which berries are safe?" Her eyes widened with curiosity. "I want to make juice. Tell me which ones won’t kill me."

Elias smirked, pushing the door open with a creak. "Easy. Red ones with white spots? Instant funeral. Plump black ones? Fine... if you like vomiting blood an hour later."

Inside, vines slithered across rusted racks, heavy with clusters of glistening fruit. But then Elias stopped. On the floor, he knelt in the shadows, fingers digging into the soil, scooping berries into a cracked jar. He didn’t look up.

"Elias?" Greta said sharply.

Elias slowly turned—and smiled. His teeth were stained dark, lips cracked and bleeding. "Trying a new recipe," he whispered, holding up the jar.

It wriggled.

Greta stepped back. “What... what’s in there?” The berries pulsed, as if breathing.

Elias grabbed her arm. “Berries.”

“We should go,” urged Greta, her voice deepening.

“They’re perfect,” Elias murmured, holding a clump toward Greta.

The fruits pulsed faintly, as if breathing.

Greta stumbled back, her throat tight. “Stop—it’s not normal. Look at your hands.”

Elias’ fingers were streaked black, his knuckles raw, but he didn’t notice. A thin, high hum came from the bushes, and the berries in Elias’s palm began to wriggle, tiny stems curling like roots around their wrist.

Greta’s breath hitched. “Elias, drop them!”

But Elias only smiled, wide and hollow, as the dark juice of the berries seeped into his skin. “It’s ok, Polly. They’re not poisonous, and they don’t stain.”

He had brushed his fingers against a cluster of spiky ferns when the stems scurried. They coiled around his hand, piercing his skin with needle-like tips, and wriggled deeper, writhing as if burrowing toward some

hidden pulse. Blood bloomed across his palm, dark and slow, dripping onto the concrete in crimson drops.

“Elias!” Greta’s scream tore the stillness, high and shuddering. She staggered backward, her face pale beneath a tangle of sweat-dampened hair. “Your—your hands!”

Elias blinked, wincing at the sting, and stared at his fingers. Nothing. No punctures. No blood. Only unbroken skin, smooth as glass. He turned his palms upward, smearing them against his jeans for good measure, and frowned. “There’s nothing there, Polly. Are you sure you’re ok?”

But the plants hadn’t finished. Shadows of movement flickered in the corners of his vision—leaves curling tighter, roots twitching beneath the soil as though the greenhouse itself were holding its breath, waiting.

“But I saw it.”

Elias shakes his head and turns to her, his smile growing. “There was nothing. Let’s...” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “Do something else. You wanted to see the berries, didn’t you?”

Greta staggers in clear uncertainty. “I—uh—yes. For the juice.”

Elias led Greta deeper into the shade, where the fake trees leaned in too close and the light never quite reached the ground.

His fingers, stained purple at the tips, plucked a cluster of plump red berries from a low, twisting branch. “These,” he said, voice soft but steady, “You can eat. Sweet as sugar.”

Greta hesitated, staring at the berries like they might blink. They glistened, too perfect, as if painted on.

“But those,” Elias continued, pointing to another bush—this one sagging under the weight of glossy black orbs that pulsed like slow hearts, “don’t even look at them.”

Greta took a step closer. “Why not?”

A leaf twitched without wind.

“Because last week.” Elias’ voice was a whisper. “I saw one grow a tooth.”

Greta jerked back, her laugh unsure. She thought he’d been joking. But he wasn’t. The blackberries swayed slightly, all turning toward her voice. Elias didn’t move. He watched. And smiled.

Without a word, Elias knelt, parting another curtain of pale, vein-like roots. Nestled in the black soil was a cluster of berries, their skins so dark they seemed to swallow the weak light.

"Eat one," he said, his voice low, almost reverent.

Greta hesitated, her fingers twitching. "They're a bit bitter but still great." He plucked one, held it between his thumb and forefinger like an offering.

"Go on," he urged, his smile dropping above his sunken eyes. The berry burst on her tongue—cloyingly sweet, then metallic.

"Here," said Elias, holding up a lemon. "Bite it."

Her fingers curled around the lemon, she bit down on it. Then gagged, but it was too late.

Elias's laugh was thin and sharp, like wind through dead stalks. He offered the napkin, but when her hands stayed frozen in her lap, he closed the distance. He wiped her chin, his touch heavy and cold, lingering long enough to feel the pulse thrumming in her throat—a trapped bird.

"Eat," he urged, a dark glint in his gaze. "They're an acquired taste. The earth has to teach you how to crave them."

"Tasteless and then sweet? What is it?" she said, smacking her lips again.

"Synsepalum dulcificum. They call it the miracle berry."

Greta's brows furrowed. "Miracle, why?"

"It's very low in sugar and nearly tasteless, but it comes with a glycoprotein, miraculin, which binds to the taste buds, specifically the sweet receptor, and paired with the lemon, the protein alters the taste."

Greta furrows her brows. "Still sweet."

"True, but be careful—confuse it with bearberries, and you won't gag. You'll dissolve."

"So it doesn't work as a recipe."

He laughs, then tosses the berry into the black soil, and it sinks as if swallowed by the earth itself. "Sure does if you're careful enough."

In the dim glow of the greenhouse, Greta leaned over a row of tangled vines and asked, “What about the berries over there—”

Elias was already on his knees, his fingers brushing the damp soil as he collected a handful of dark, glistening fruit. The rustle of leaves seemed louder than usual, and Kristian, who had stepped through the cracked glass door, stopped dead in his tracks and watched.

“Looks like we haven’t been formally introduced,” Kristian said, wiping a smear of earth from his cheek. “I’ll be helping with the greenhouse all winter. The plants need a steady hand. Kristian Berg.”

Elias shook his hand, nodding. “Elias Elster, I’m here for the winter work, at the orchids.”

Greta glanced at the overhead vents and shouted, “It’s summer!” The two men laughed, an uneasy sound that bounced off the rows of wilted lettuce.

“How can it be both?” Elias asked, bewildered.

“It was an accident.” Kristian’s voice was a murmur, his eyes drifting to a stalk of corn that swayed like seaweed under water. “The machines come through at night, and people get lost among the stalks. Hide there and you’ll be trampled, your bones scattered among the husks. The lights are so bright you could think the sun is shining.”

Elias shrugged. “I heard two patients disappeared around here.” He tilted his head, the fresh air like cuts on his skin.

“Most people don’t talk about the institute. They think there are crazy people here.” Kristian replied, his voice dropping to a whisper. “They say the garden is cursed, but the real horror is that those coming never leave.”

He pointed toward a drooping willow that hung over a shadowed corner of the greenhouse. “Her eyes are under the willow tree,” he said.

Elias stared, expecting a metaphor. “What do you mean?”

Kristian's smile cracked. "Not metaphorically. Look." He lifted a wilted leaf to reveal two milky, unblinking eyes peering from the soil, glistening with a sickly green hue. The eyes blinked once, once more, and then the willow's branches rustled as if breathing.

The berries in Greta's hand turned black, oozing a thick, dark sap that smelled of rot. The greenhouse seemed to close in, the herbs turning to fumes.

Elias shifted. "Nice trick."

Greta nudged her head sideways as a thin tendril brushed her cheek. "Uh, you wanted to show me more of the berries."

Elias, his coat stained with sap, gave a casual shrug and forced a smile. "Right," he replied, nonchalantly. "Sorry about that." He reached for a cluster of glossy, violet-black berries

Kristian stepped forward, lifting his hands in a wide, calming gesture. "We can talk later," he said

The vines, however, seemed to coil tighter around his arms, thorns pricking his skin as if urging him to stay.

Elias swallowed hard, his eyes darting to the shadows where faint, green-lit eyes watched from the underbrush.

"Sorry," he apologized again, his words lost to the rustle of leaves that sounded eerily like muted laughter.

"They're beautiful," she whispered, reaching out a finger. Elias stopped her with a touch to her wrist—his hand cold, his smile colder.

"Don't," he said. "Most of these aren't only poisonous. They persuade."

He plucked a violet berry, its juice seeping like ink between his fingers. "This one? It'll make you hear your mother's voice, even if she's been dead for decades." Another, black as a wound, he held to the light: "This one? It'll let you see what's buried under your feet... and it won't be pretty."

Greta laughed, but the sound caught in her throat when the branches above rustled, though there was no wind.

“How do you know all this?” she asked, an edge creeping into her voice.

Elias tilted his head, studying her. “It comes with the job,” he said. “People forget to pack dinner. Then they get… creative.” His gaze flicked to the shadows where the berries hung thickest. “And the orchard’s very generous. Free samples, you could say.”

Somewhere, a bird shrieked. Greta backed away as the berries seemed to glisten brighter, their stems twisting like fingers reaching through the leaves.

Elias didn’t move. “Careful,” he murmured. “You’ll miss the show.”

“Here.” He held out a clump of matte, midnight-black berries that dangled from a twisted bramble like tiny, accusing eyes. The air smelled of damp earth and something sour, a faint metallic tang that made Greta’s throat tighten.

“These are night-thorn berries.” His voice low enough to blend with the rustle of the vines. “One bite and the poison spreads faster than a river in flood—your heart will seize, your skin will turn ashen, and the last thing you’ll see is the world turning black as these fruits.”

Greta’s brow furrowed, her voice dropping to a scornful scoff. “I don’t think you should grow poison here.”

“They’re not poisonous. They’re plants. Touch them, and you’ll feel the roots in your bones. It’s good for the environment. If you’re a tree.”

Greta nodded, but her smile was too stiff, her eyelids heavy like petals closing at dusk. Her mind seemed to drift off. Elsewhere. Then she looked up again. “I’ll be asleep in 21 minutes and 2 seconds after dinner,” she murmured, almost to herself. “So, good night.” She’d held out her hand, but Elias was too taken aback to mirror her gesture.

“21 minutes and 2 seconds,” he repeated, almost to himself. Then he froze, looking after her as she hurried along the path. “That’s… specific.”

He remembered the pills they all took at night. Could it be? No, this wasn’t a prison, was it? Elias remained in the humid, green rot of the greenhouse, his brow furrowing into deep lines as he tracked Greta’s retreat.

He watched the way her shoulders hunched, his eyes fixed on her as if measuring her growth against the stakes. He didn't blink until the door clicked shut behind her, leaving only the heavy, rhythmic dripping of condensation on the glass.

The greenhouse door clicked shut behind Greta, the sound a sharp noise in the humid air before everything fell silent. Elias remained rooted in the green rot for a moment, watching her silhouette shrink through the fogged glass. His brow furrowed, tracking her rhythmic, hurried retreat across the yard—twenty-one minutes and two seconds, a countdown ticking in the back of his mind. He needed to do it properly now.

With a slow shake of his head, he finally stepped out.

Elias walked out of the garden and into the kitchen. The sudden change in temperature hit him—the air inside was cold and smelled like old metal. He looked up and saw his uncle, Jaspar, standing by the counter.

Elias looked at him and felt a familiar, heavy tightness in his chest. Jaspar didn’t look like the man who had raised him; he looked like a ghost wearing his uncle's skin.

“Are you ok?” Jaspar ran a shaky hand through his hair, and a dark blond strand fell from behind his ear.

To Elias, he looked smaller than he used to, his shoulders hunched as if he were trying to hide from the very walls of the house. There was a time when Elias would have gone to him for answers, but now, looking at the grey tint of Jaspar's skin and the way his eyes avoided the light, Elias only felt a cold sort of pity.

Elias nods. His fingers brushed the twisted berries that hung like tiny bruises on the stalks. Without a word he tore them from the stalks, crushed them in his palm until they oozed a thick, dark pulp, and folded the mess into a steaming bowl of oatmeal. The mixture smelled faintly of rot.

Across the room, Elias stared out the cracked window at the endless cornfield. The stalks swayed like a sea of pale knives, each blade catching the waning light and throwing long shadows across the soil. A low, dry

rustle rose from the rows, as if the corn itself were whispering a warning. He could feel the air thicken, the scent of the berries seeping through the wall like thick syrup.

He slipped up the creaky stairs to Greta's door, the old wood groaning under his weight. When he reached the knob, he paused, then knocked once—hard enough to echo like a warning. The door swung open a crack; without a word, he set the bowl of berries and oatmeal on the floor, the red fruit spilling like tiny blood spots across the cheap carpet. It oozed slowly, a sticky scar that glistened in the night. Greta's silhouette lingered in the doorway, eyes wide with a mixture of confusion, but he didn't wait for an answer. He stepped back and stalked down the hallway until the light of her room was so in the shadows that her voice wouldn't cut through.

Two Little Black Birds

Bend the knee for the false prophet, and you shall walk alone. Kneel for him, and you shall be trampled by all.

— Johan 10:3

Chapter 3: Kristian

The next day didn't dawn, it curled upon them with an eerie silence with breathless light. The world outside sat in eerie silence for what was about to come, as if the wind itself had been forced to its knees.

Kristian walked out from the sunroom after three ritualistic hours of silence—a place of glass and heat that seemed to mock its own name with the atmosphere that filled its walls. A kiln. A self-chosen prison. His eyes, bruised from the strain of standing still for so long, slowly adjusted to the dim light that filtered through the soiled windows.

As he stepped out into the main room, Greta approached him with regard, her hands cradling a lavender sachet that she had crafted herself.

The stitching was right, quick and uneven, but the soft, soothing scent of the dried flowers seemed to whisper comfort, like a wound sewn shut. Kristian took the small, heavy bundle, his fingers brushing Greta's skin—a contact that felt like two stones grinding against another.

He tied the sachet to his bodice, the lavender-filled pouch hanging over his heart like a second chamber. He nudged her, but it wasn't scornful, but playful and the glint in his eyes showed her.

He extended his hand, his eyes locked onto hers. Slowly, she raised her own hand, her fingers extending towards his like an offering. The moment their palms met, a violent chill seeped through Kristian's bones. His fingers didn't just hold hers, they recoiled, his grip tightening, rooting against the bones of her hand.

"Come," he breathed, the words less of an invitation and more of a command hissed through the air. "Look."

He tilted his head towards the edge of the forest. There, coming from the grey mist, was a deer. Its eyes weren't warm; they were black, like glass, fixed on them with a predatory glance. It stood perfectly still, its ribcage frozen as if it were a wooden carving placed there to watch them die.

Krsitian led her forward, dragging her onto the damp, freezing soil. Every step they took felt like a violation of the silence.

Beneath their boots, the dried leaves didn't just crunch, they snapped like teeth as the trees leant inward, branches weaving together overhead.

They stood paralysed in the gloom, their lungs burning as they held their breath. They felt it then—the heavy pressure of a thousand unseen eyes peering from the dark between the trunks, waiting for the flowers to give them a signal.

For a heartbeat, the world went utterly silent, terrifyingly still. There was no peace here—only the sound of two hearts thudding in a shared cage and the realisation that they weren't watching the forest. The forest was watching them.

The air between them died as the deer began to lift its head. Greta's fingers dug into the meat of Kristian's arm, her nails dragging along the bone but he didn't move. He was a statue himself.

The deer didn't move with the wind; it reached upward, its hooves clicking like a winch. When it finally faced them, the sky seemed to darken. The deer was a ruin of flesh. Beneath the crown of antlers, the creature's face had been split open like a pomegranate.

There were four eyes, dark pits that didn't blink. They were set into two different fused skulls that melted into one single, blood-slicked neck.

The muzzles were raw, the skin peeled back to reveal bone and teeth that looked far too human. The two heads twitched in a sickening synchronicity, their nostrils flaring as they tasted the scent of Greta's terror.

This wasn't a birth defect. This was the Tethered. Krisitian knew. Nature had forced two lives to take the space of one.

Greta's breath came in a jagged hitch. Her voice was the ghost of a sound. "You said—"

They both froze. The deer lifted its head, and Greta saw it. She grabbed Kristian's arm so hard her nails dug in.

Kristian's jaw remained locked, a muscle twitching in his cheek. He didn't look at her.

The creature's gentle eyes, usually a warm brown, now seemed to hold an intensity as it locked gazes with the pair. But it was not the eyes themselves that triggered these horrors—it was the fact that there were four of them, staring back.

The deer's body, usually sleek, now seemed distorted, as if nature itself had been twisted and corrupted. Two heads, disfigured, the nose raw and bloody. But the most striking thing was not the blood but the identical yet distinct heads that sat atop the creature's neck, their muzzles twitching in unison as they regarded Greta and Kristian with an unspeakable hostility. Two heads. Both traumatizingly functional.

Greta's breathing was ragged, her words barely above a whisper. Words failed her as she attempted the sentence for the third time. "You... you said the Tethered was... fake."

Kristian's jaw set, but he dared to move his head. "I said it didn't exist. Not that it was fake," he corrected, without raising his head to look at her. "Wait a minute, I want to try something."

Kristian pulled the worn wicker basket from the tree's shadow, though the weight of it felt wrong. Too heavy. Like it was filled with wet soil. As he lifted the first apple, the skin shifted under his thumb with a pop.

He didn't flinch. He tucked it back into the basket and reached for another apple until his fingers were met with something firm. This one, he carefully wrapped in a linen cloth, the soft fabric no match to the darkness that seemed to seep from every pore of their cramped surroundings. He swaddled the "clean" apple in linen, though the cloth stained damp almost immediately. When he pressed the bundle into Greta's hand, his gaze held hers, a fleeting glimmer of unease passed between them before she turned to make her way to the deer.

Kristian's breath paused as he watched Greta's composure shatter. Her boot skidded off a root. And the apple tumbled from her grip with a plop. Centimeters from her toes, it rolled a bit before the soil pinned it to the spot, as though the ground itself had clenched against its motion.

The thing that wore the skin of a deer tilted its head above her, its eyes a cold, liquid silver, its antlers shining like bony branches.

Kristian could see the fine hairs of her neck standing straight, but she didn't back off. She couldn't. Every instinct warned that this was no ordinary creature, not a stray buck but instead something that had

hollowed out a deer and wore its skin. Something older and hungrier. The woods had a pulse again, but it wasn't her own. Kristian knew she had figured it out.

The deer's head slowly tilted upwards, its large eyes meeting hers with an unblinking stare. As its jaw unhinged, stretching far past the limits of bone and tendon, a void stared back at him. The same void he'd seen in the hallway. The same void he'd seen in Greta's eyes.

The second head tilted around, and before Greta had the chance to look at Kristian, from the gaping void of its mouth, a swarm of maggots spilled, their white bodies dropping to the ground.

They cascaded in waves, going with the rhythm of decomposition, as the deer's mouth trembled under the weight of its stillness, tearing open by the amount of maggots.

Then its jaw broke in two, revealing not teeth but a pulsating mass of gruel-like decay. Maggots spilled from the gaping wound, more and more... they just didn't stop.

A low, gurgling rattle vibrated in its throat, and the deer's lower jaw shuddered, hinges of bone and sinew giving way with a sickening crack. It crashed to the soil, now a useless limb, as the maggots drew forth in waves, burrowing into the soil like rot. Its hollow eyes, once brown, now dripped in blood.

Kristian's hand lunged forward, grazing through the wool of Greta's sleeve to yank her back from the white, squirming mass. But she was faster. She dropped down, her hand disappearing into the shadow of her boot.

At first, Kristian thought it to be a cattle prod. But it wasn't. When the light caught the cold shine of metal, he knew. It was a gun.

Before he could scream at her, the world exploded. The roar of the gun found shelter in the forest, its noise swallowed by trees without a thought. It left nothing but silence between them.

His mind spun, unable to comprehend what had happened. He still stood frozen, his hand reaching for the girl who had transformed into a violent creature right in front of his eyes. Kristian stared, unable to look away. He stood in silence, his mind racing as he tried to make sense of the sudden explosion of violence.

It was only when the stillness became unbearable that he found his voice, his words barely above a whisper.

"Why do you have a gun?"

Greta's frown deepened; her gaze drifted towards the farmhouse with a mixture of frustration and dread.

She chuckled, but her response was laced with bitterness. It didn't sound friendly. "Why teach me gunmanship if I'm never meant to use it?"

Kristian's boots crunched against the fallen leaves as he turned back, his gaze locking onto the deer. It lay trembling on the blood-soaked soil. The animal's ragged breaths rose and fell like a broken gasp.

He stepped forward, taking the gun from her fingers. She resisted. And he felt like he was prying the weapon from a dead woman.

He sank into a crouch, his fingers white-knuckled as they curled around the barrel of the gun. The steel was a biting, unnatural frost against his palm, yet it felt fragile compared to the thing before him.

The deer's eyes—wide, wet, and horribly fixed—locked onto his. They weren't the eyes of an animal in shock; they were glossy, bottomless wells.

For a second, the whole world shrunk down to that one staring eye. There was no splashing blood, no struggling, and no gasping for air. The silence was so heavy it made his ears ache. He looked at the jagged hole the bullet had ripped into its chest—a black, dry crater. Inside the wound, a mass of pale maggots kept crawling, unbothered by the metal.

The truth hit him like ice water down his spine. When he finally spoke, his voice was a thin, terrified whisper.

"It's not dead."

He pressed the muzzle against the deer's temple, the cold steel sinking into the matted, damp fur. Beneath it, the skull felt soft, like wet cardboard. His other hand hovered near the animal's throat, where the second, parasitic head rested—a pale, fleshy lump that rose and fell.

He squeezed the trigger.

The blast was a sudden, violent strobe light that scorched the shadows away for a fraction of a second. The deer's body gave one sharp, spasmic jerk and then went deathly still.

Kristian leaned in, his own breath hitching as he watched the light retreat from those massive, oily eyes.

Greta shifted behind him. "Shouldn't you not touch it?"

"It's dead." Kristian's voice is quiet as he casts his gaze toward the meadow beside him. "It can't do anything for us anymore."

Kneeling, he pressed his thumb against the deer's eyelid, closing it with a gentleness that felt misplaced.

Around him, branches rustled, and he was certain that he could hear the distant hoot of an owl.

He reached for two leaves, their edges crisped with spring's decay, and tucked them over its closed, unmoving eyes.

When he straightened himself, the leaves clung to the deer's face, small against the mass of red.

Greta said nothing; her silence was a mirror for the unease that twisted a knot in the pit of his stomach. The act was supposed to be mercy, yet it tasted like finality, maybe. He wasn't sure for whom.

As the forest swallowed the deer whole, its suffering soon to be covered in moss, its bones reduced to ash, and Kristian let out a breath. Mercy, he thought, was another kind of violence.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Kristian's voice was low, as though the trees might eavesdrop.

She didn't answer immediately. A gust of wind tugged her auburn braid loose, a single strand fell over her shoulder. Her gaze didn't pull back from the carcass.

"It's dead," Her voice was a hiss, the word sharp enough to send an arrow through its neck. "What's the point in pretending otherwise? You think it's going to jump up and—" She gestured with a flick of her wrist, mocking a lunge. "—bite me?"

Kristian stepped closer, the sour stench of decay thickened the air between them. “You’re not scared? Because I am. We’re supposed to be leaving this place, not... lingering.” His voice dipped, urgent. “Did you hear the howl back there? That wasn’t a wolf.”

Greta laughed, but it was hollow, the sound snapping like a twig. “So what? It’s a deer. A dead one. You said everything Papa said was a lie—” She kicked at a tangle of entrails, her shoe sinking into the mud. “—then why not that too?”

Kristian almost admired how naive it sounded. His voice was a scornful snort. “Not everything is a lie.” His hand shot out, gripping her arm as a violent shudder ran through her.

Her pupils were too wide, her breath shallow.

“You’re not ok,” said Kristian, the statement heavy with something between fear and frustration. “You’ve been this close to asking me to let you shoot it. You wanted me to let you.”

Greta yanked her arm free. The quick movement sent her hair fanning like chestnut leaves in the summer air. “Maybe. Maybe I want answers; maybe I want to know what happens when he comes! Is that so hard to believe? You think I wanted to stumble into this... and give in?” Her chin trembled, but her eyes burned with defiant rage. “Or are you scared? Scared of what it means? Because you felt it, didn’t you? That thing in the trees before? The wrongness?”

Kristian exhaled. He ran a hand through his hair. “Fine. But we’re not standing here all night. Not with that thing out there. The one that did this.” He jerked his head at the deer, his throat working. “Come on. Let’s go. Before the next one is us.”

Greta didn’t move. She stared at the carcass, her back turned like a challenge. And in the distance, the howl echoed again.

"I don't recognize myself anymore," whispered Greta, her voice barely audible over the sound of her own heartbeat.

Kristian knew that she would talk about it eventually. But this was the wrong moment.

"I know what you mean." Concern clogged his features. "It's like we've been living in a dream, and now that we're waking up, we're not sure who we are or where we belong."

She had been so full of life, so full of hope and dreams. But now, she was different. Perhaps Lis' death was when she changed, when she drove that nail gun through her sister's skull like it was nothing.

Or maybe it was when Ben seized her like cattle. And partially, that was his fault, if not fully. Kristian could have stopped it, more than once. He didn't. And his skin paid for it every single night.

"I used to be so carefree, so happy," Greta's voice cracked. "But now, I feel like I'm turning into Lis. She was mad. I'm scared, Kristian. I'm not mad." She shook her head. Tears welled in her eyes. "I'm not like Mamma. I'm scared that if I go into the woods, I'll never find my way back."

Kristian reached out, his hand covering hers, his touch warm and comforting. "We've both been through so much. It's ok to feel lost, to feel like we're not sure who we are anymore."

Greta looked up at him, her eyes searching for answers. "But what if I never find my way back?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"You will."

"I'm scared," she whispered, her voice trembling.

Kristian's grip on her hand tightened. "I'm here." A frown settled on his forehead. "I'll always be here, no matter what. I still see the old you in there, Margareta." His voice was low and laced with a hint of sadness. He'd said her name. Not a nickname. Her name. "I'm sure everyone else does too."

She looked up, her eyes searching for answers, but Kristian's expression only reflected his concern.

"Did someone make you think otherwise?" He murmured, his brow furrowed like he was staring at a ghost. It's not what he wanted to ask. Did Elias make you feel otherwise? But he didn't say that.

Greta's breath hitched. Her mouth opened, then shut, as if the words had been swallowed. "Did you put a bowl of oatmeal at my door last night?"

Kristian scoffs, his head shaking. "No. But I saw him in the kitchen with oatmeal."

“Why would Elias make me oatmeal?”

“To be nice?” Shrugs Kristian.

“Right.” Greta's voice was barely above a whisper as she replied.

“Does that bother you that much?”

"No, it’s not about Elias. It’s about me. I feel...different. Like I'm losing myself, piece by piece."

“What do you mean, different?" he pressed, his voice gentle but insistent.

Greta's shoulders shrugged, and a faint smile played on her lips, but it was a smile that didn't crease her eyes. "I don't know...it's sometimes I look in the mirror, and I don't recognize the person staring back at me. It's like I'm a stranger to myself. And I miss Esja."

He knew she did. He knew. The words spilled out of her like a confession, and Kristian's grip on her arm tightened. "That's not true. You're still the same person you've always been. We all see it, even if you don't."

The front door creaked shut behind them, and with it came the sharp, earthy scent of black tea, a thin film of steam curling from mugs already lined up on the long, scarred table.

Greta shivered, though whether from the cold or the unease coiling in her stomach, he couldn’t tell. Her boots echoed on the floorboards as she joined the others already hunched over the steaming cups. And Kristian silently followed her, like a ghost.

“It’s freezing today,” said Elias, blowing on his tea. His voice was too loud. There was dirt on his hands, thick like overwatery cake. He sat there, his blond hair messy and partially wet, too. He looked like he’d frozen to death in the lake. Kristian wished he did.

Jaspar, his hair still wet, didn’t look up from his cup. “Then drink,” he said, her tone as twisted as the frost pattern on the windows, the dark green shutters barely holding them together.

Kristian walked around the table and sat down at the other side, making sure to keep distance between himself and the orchard workers, and he knew he had a shadow. “Are you two good? You smell like the lake.”

“We were at the lake, strangely enough,” chuckled Elias, then paused, the silence among the table swallowing his usual gum-clicking noise. A hollow chuckle escaped him as he leaned over the table. “The lake’s view is better now,” he said, his voice low. “Makes you less likely to be taken by Nøkken.”

He heard how Greta and Esja chuckled but couldn’t figure out why it was so funny. The sound of it grated against his nerves. It was a shrill harmony that felt too bright for the dim rooms. Too bright for Dark Season.

Kristian’s fingers hovered over the edge of Greta’s mug, the ceramic cold, but his gaze was pulled, like a magnet, to the empty chair opposite him. Erik should be there. He used to be there. And if Kristian looked at the chair long enough, he felt he could feel his hand on his shoulder, telling him to straighten the doily. And then he could almost smell the scent of the terrible tea he liked to drink.

“I could eat something,” said Greta suddenly, the words slipping out before she could stop them. Kristian frowned, her words pulling him out of his thoughts.

From the kitchen, Ada chuckled, hollow. “You know the commandments, Greta. Dark Season isn’t a suggestion; we cannot anger the Lord.”

Greta scoffs harshly. “You were, what? Baptized four years ago, what do you know?”

“I can still feel the blood in my ears,” comments Ada. “It’s always with me, and so do the commandments.”

“And what if it’s killing me?” The heat in Greta’s voice startled even her. It was clear that she regretted it instantly. After all, Ada was only ten.

Finally, Kristian lifted his chin; his eyes flicked up, quick but wary. “It’s not about you,” he hissed. “It’s about them.”

Them. The ones who’d vanished last season. The ones who’d disobeyed the commandments. She had almost vanished too.

Kristian cleared his throat, his voice softening. “You’ll feel better after the tea. Drink.”

He told himself she’d survive it, but the thought felt like a lie told to somebody dying. His knuckles were bone as he strangled the mug, the ceramic groaning under the pressure of his nails.

His eyes were pinned to the clock on the wall, tracking the second hand as it ticked through the silence like a knife.

Ninety-four days.

Ninety-four days were left. The number rotted in his mind like an unwanted guest. Ninety-four days until the restrictions withered away—until the act of chewing in the day hours wasn't a heresy punished by the dark, until food wasn't a sin. He looked at the shadows in the corner, imagining the heathens gasping for air, their lungs finally exploding without the suffocating grip of the commandments. Until then, every breath was a debt. And food was a sin that no amount of prayer could wash away.

"We shouldn't have moved the furniture," said Lars suddenly, gesturing to the bare table, his hands clutched around the lace of his bodice. "It makes the void too obvious."

"Let it be obvious," snapped Kristian. "Remember why we do this."

Kristian watched Greta's hand inch toward the plate, then freeze. If you take it, they'll come for you too. The warning wasn't from her father but from the shadows in the corners of the room, where the light didn't dare to reach. He turned his head away, and she gripped her mug tighter, as if the porcelain could steady more than her hands.

"Talk to me," she whispered to no one. Dark Season was not a time for hunger. It was a time for reckoning. And Greta was clearly running out of reasons to obey.

Don't entice heresy. Commandment number.... He forgot. To hell with them.

As Kristian lifted the glass to his lips, the faint moonlight that entered through the gritty window brought out the desperation in his eyes. He downed two glasses of water in a hurry, the liquid splashing down his throat with a soothing calmness that was short-lived.

With a hint of dissatisfaction, he placed the container back on the worn, wooden table, sighing in defeat. He would give anything for goat milk with honey and warmed bread with cheese right now. But he wasn't a heathen.

"I miss it," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I miss how alive the house felt during harvest, when every room was full of colors and every corner was alive."

Kristian, curling his hands into fists above the table, nodded in agreement. "I do too. But—."

“I know.” Greta's gaze snapped back to Kristian, a hint of defiance flickering in her eyes. And for the first time, Kristian didn’t hate it. "You're always saying that, Kristian. 'This isn't the time.' But when will it be the time? When will we be allowed to feel again, to remember the way things used to be?"

Kristian's expression remained stoic, but a faint crease between his eyebrows betrayed his concern. "We can't afford to lie to ourselves, not now, maybe when the dark season is over."

Greta's laughter was low and husky, a sound that sent shivers down Kristian's spine. "Those commandments don't apply anymore, Kristian. They died along with the colors; they died with Lis... and Papa. And then came the robins. *So many robins.*"

Kristian felt a shiver run down his spine. He knew Greta was right, that the rules they'd once lived by were nothing more than a distant memory. But he also knew that giving in to their emotions, to their memories, would be a luxury they couldn't afford. Not now, when every moment counted, when every decision could mean the difference between life and death.

"Greta, please," he said, his voice low. "Let's focus on getting through this season, ok, sweetheart? We can't afford to lose ourselves in the past."

Greta's gaze locked onto his, a spark of determination igniting in her eyes. "I'm not losing myself, Kristian.”

Kristian hisses under his breath. “You don’t want to end up like the deer, do you?”

Greta scoffs. “I’m not going to get poisoned; I’m not stupid.”

“And the deer is?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

"It isn't true, Greta. The commandments still apply, and even if the Lord is coming, you should be grateful. You were destined for this."

Greta's eyes rolled in exasperation, a spark of defiance igniting within her. "Destined for the Lord, but not even allowed to parallel park," she joked.

Kristian's smile faltered, and he looked at her with a hint of concern. "Greta, you know it's not like that. The Lord's expectations are...different. You'll be prepared, I promise."

Greta shook her head, a sense of unease settling in the pit of her stomach. "Prepared? For what? To be some kind of sacrificial lamb? I don't think so."

“Sacrifical lamb? Who said that?”

“Cthaoc.”

Kristian's expression turned stoic, and he reached out, his hand brushing against Greta's. "He’s lying."

"You think we can do this, don't you?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Kristian's eyes locked onto hers, his gaze burning. "I know you can, sweetheart. We have to believe."

Elias wheezed a cough, his fork lifting. He angled the silverware toward Greta, his grin crooked. “I think you’re pretty capable too,” he said, the words a dare.

Across the table, Kristian’s gaze snapped up, his expression full of skepticism.

“Heard that?” muttered Greta to Kristian, the scoff soft in her throat. “He said I’m capable.” When Kristian finally spoke, his voice was cold. “It doesn’t matter what he says.” He shook his head, then paused to inhale as he hovered his hand toward Elias, half extended. "You don't know her." His voice was low and menacing. "You're only a seasonal orchardist. I've known her longer than you've been alive."

Elias's eyes flashed, and his hand instinctively flew to his chest, as if to shield himself from Kristian's verbal blow.

"Charming," retorted Elias, a wry smile spreading across his face. "I'm older than you think."

Kristian raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite himself. "Ja?" His tone was dripping with skepticism.

Elias’ smile grew, his lips curling upward. "Thirty-one."

Kristian's smirk returned, and he shot back, "Then I've known her longer than you've been alive. I'm forty."

Elias let out a mocking laugh, the sound echoing through the darkness. "So what?" His voice was taunting, like he was playing a game. "You've known her longer than *she's* been alive?"

Kristian's expression turned somber, his eyes clouding over. He whispered, his voice barely audible. It was childish. "Something like that."

"A friend on your mamma's side?"

Lord, thought Kristian, what a nosy ass.

“Erik and I met through the community.” It was vague; they didn’t meet at church. They’d met at Trolltunga, where Kristian was on hand to watch Erik, barely twenty-four, ready to go to hell and back—quite literally, unfortunately for them—for a woman he only recently met. Just a *joke*, they’d said. “I was five when I met him, so I’ve known Margareta all my life.”

The hem of Kristian’s trousers was pulled down in a slight tug, and the sudden, insistent pull snapped him out of his thoughts. He shoved the tablecloth aside, revealing Kai crouched beneath the dining table like a ghost, his pale eyes wide and unblinking in the dim light.

“Hey—what’s going on?” Kristian’s voice hitches, sharp and defensive, as the boy scrambles forward, knees scraping against the floorboards.

Kai’s a child, only a child, yet there’s something fragile in the way he clings to his request.

“Can we talk?” His voice was a whisper as he stepped into the flickering glow of the chandelier.

Kristian nods, his throat tight, the weight of his own guilt pressing against his ribs.

Kai hesitates, then asks, “Can I bring Greta water later?” His smile is small and trembling, a fragile thing that barely managed to creep to the corners of his eyes.

Kristian’s jaw clenches. No, the sin in his bones screams. “No,” he says, sterner this time, his voice pushed too far. “The Lord watches, Kai. If you disobey—He’ll take you. Too soon. And I can’t... Sarah needs time with Him. Alone.”

At the mention of his mother, Kai flinches but doesn’t look away. Kristian turns back to the table, his hands

shaking as he grips the edge, as if anchoring himself to a world that's already slipping into shadow.

The mood was tense, a full feast with silent emotions, each more rotten than the next: guilt, grief, and the edges of a faith that feels less like salvation and more like a cage for the children. But it was better like this. For both of them.

Kristian jolted away from the table, his chair scraping against the floor like an exorcism. He dabbed at his lips with a napkin, the motion harsh, almost defiant, before flinging it onto his seat like a discarded husk.

"Excuse me for a moment."

His words clung to the air, like a hollow excuse, as he strode toward the greenhouse. Beyond the kitchen's dim glow, the glass structure loomed—a landmark of twisted vines and damp secrets, a splash of green in the grey clouds.

Henrik sat cross-legged on the stool, his silhouette blurred by the haze of heat rising from the plants. When he stood, Kristian's eyes snagged on the monstera vine inked across the other man's kneecap, its leaves curling like claws in the shadowed hollow. Kristian's breath died in his throat; the greenhouse felt suddenly smaller, the air heavier, as though the plants were holding their own breath.

"How's Ada?" Henrik's voice was soft but edged with worry. Ada had been five when Elva passed—too young to understand the finality of the word gone.

Kristian exhaled, eyes scanning the frosted trail leading to the berry grove. "She's drawn to the Bearberries again. I don't trust that place. It's like she's... bargaining with the past." His boot scuffed a pebble. "How about you? Since Erik—?"

Henrik's jaw tightened. "Greta's all that matters now. Not Erik. Not Maks." The name Maks hung between them, a discordant note. Kristian tilted his head, his stoicism cracking slightly. "Maks is different. He never left, did he?"

A flicker of bitterness crossed Henrik's face. "Greta still fills a glass of milk and leaves it by Lis's door every night," Kristian said, quieter now. The admission felt like a prayer. Henrik knew Lis—perhaps he knew her

too well, like a woman who he'd raised like a storm-tossed flock. Dead for a year. Some wounds never scabbed.

"She hasn't had to ration oats this winter," said Henrik. No drought, no frost-bleached fields to compound their losses.

Kristian huffed. It was the closest thing to a laugh he could muster. "Hope's a stubborn thing, Henrik." But as they turned toward the village, Henrik saw him glance through the window, back at the forest, where the bearberries glinted blood-red in the half-light.

As Kristian gazed out at the field, his eyes landed on Elias, who was chatting with the other workers at the far end.

Elias caught his eye and waved, but Kristian's expression darkened into a frown. "Who is this guy, anyway?" He couldn't shake the feeling that Elias had gotten too close to Greta, in a suspiciously short amount of time. He turned to Henrik, who was standing nearby, and asked, "Can you run a background check on him? I want to know what his story is."

Henrik offered a limp shrug, his eyes never quite meeting Kristian's. "Sure," he muttered, the words dropping like dead weight. "If you want me to."

Kristian didn't wait for more. He pushed back from the plants, the chair's legs shrieking against the floorboards like a wounded animal. He fled the greenhouse, crossing the dusk-cloaked fields where the remains of rain shimmered off the dirt like a fever dream, until the looming gray stone of the cathedral swallowed him whole.

The transition was violent. The air inside didn't just cool; it curdled, thick with the smell of damp stone and old copper. Near the arched entrance, he paused before the heavy stone basin. He reached out, his fingertips breaking the surface of the liquid within. It wasn't water. It was thick, cold, and clotted—a deep, iron-scented blood that clung to his skin like oil.

He didn't flinch as he traced a wet, dark line across his forehead. With the sticky remainder still drying on his

hand, he moved deeper into the nave.

There, bathed in the sickly amber glow of guttering candles, Ingrid and Maren stood before a circle of children. They were chanting in low, rhythmic tones, their voices a wild commotion of sound that seemed to pull the very air from the children's lungs.

As he approached, he caught Maren's eye and pulled her aside. "Have you noticed anything about Kai lately?" he asked, his voice low.

Maren's brow furrowed, her skin appearing dark in the candlelight. "What do you mean? He's been exemplary."

"Then why isn't he here?" Kristian's hand tightened on the cold stone of the archway, his fresh-dipped, bloody fingers leaving a dark, smeared print.

Maren let out a dismissive huff that sounded like air escaping a laugh. "What are you worried about? That he's sick?"

"No, he's not sick." Kristian leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper. "We don't do that anymore; do you remember? We don't have the blood for it."

Maren's face softened into a mask of pity that looked more like she was sculpted than truly made of flesh. Before she could offer her comfort, Kristian's thoughts turned to their current predicament. He felt the old guilt tear something inside of him.

"We brought the wrong meat to the altar," he spat, almost choking on the words. "Now the Lord is starving, Maren and I can hear his hunger in the wind, and I understand why. We shouldn't have run. We should have stayed and bled when it was our turn."

Maren placed a gentle hand on his arm. "We made a promise to Erik, Kristian. We can't abandon our vows."

Kristian's face contorted, his features stretching like a mask. "Erik is a feast for the worms, Maren. His word doesn't shield anyone anymore. And Margareta...look at her. She's not a child to be coddled. She's been crowned for a reason. I swore an oath to protect her. All of them, but I failed with Kai..." His voice trailed

off, the weight of his responsibilities settling heavy on his shoulders.

Kristian paused and went deathly still. “If he keeps making those sounds...take him to the barn.”

Maren stared at him, her face blank. “And what? Stun him?”

“Yes.” The word was dry. “Stun him, then let him bleed out. We do what the Lord demands.”

He braced himself for a scream; instead, he got silence.

Maren paused and just stood there. Only slowly, she reached out, and Kristian thought he needed to argue with her, but she only nodded and held out her hand. When Kristian placed his hand in hers, her skin felt like damp fabric.

“May the light guide you, *Lorentzen*,” he muttered.

She nodded, her gaze already drifting to the edge of the barn. “May the light guide you, *Berg*,”

Kristian’s hand finds Maren’s, a silent signal halting her mid-stride.

She pauses, their palms pressed together, before flipping their hands so her palm faces upward. Quick as a whisper, she drops something into his grip, her fingers curling around his in a secretive fist. A nod—soft, too quick—and she’s gone, leaving Kristian with only the faint echo of her touch. His brow furrows as he peels his fingers apart, revealing a single collated nail glinting in the light.

It’s a strange token, sharp and small, yet once it’s in his hand, the weight begins to settle. Before he can think about it further, she’s gone with the wind, brushing dust from her jeans, her smirk clear even from the corner of her eye. With a mock flip of the bird, she disappears, leaving Kristian with more questions than answers—and then with a scoff, it dawns on him.

This Little Piggy

Greta

The piercing rustle of leaves and the faint swaying of the cornstalks behind the gate filled the greenhouse on a colder afternoon. Perched on a wooden stool, Greta watched the fragile stalk droop, its ends curling like worn tears. With a hesitant breath, she pressed her fingertips into the wilted stem, feeling the tender snap of life slipping away. In that instant, a pulse of light surged through her hand, forcing the stalk to unfurl once more—its leaves rising in an explosion of green, reaching its arms up toward the sun that didn't shine.

The outcome, however, was as fragile as the panes surrounding her; the moment her skin brushed the revived foliage again, the life she had summoned flickered and faded, the fern collapsing back into wilting silence.

When the flower finally opened, the ground shook the greenhouse. The bright lamp that had hung above her for weeks sputtered, then went dark as if someone had pulled the plug on the sun itself. In the sudden blackness, a thin, eerie glow began to pulse at the far wall—an orange-red rhythm that seemed to throb like a dying heart. Shadows stretched and recoiled, turning the rows of husks into skeletal hands that reached for the light. She could hear the crackle of husks as they unfurled, and a low, whispering hum rose from the fence.

As Greta stood frozen in awe, the husks seemed to slither up the wall like snakes, filling the air with the scent of wet earth and blood.

Ben's voice ripped through the air like a blade. He walked from the shadows of the door, his footsteps heavy and uneven on the cold stone.

"What have you done now, Greta?" His face twisted in rage, like a bull ready to charge at her and tear something that wasn't his.

The blow came without a flicker of warning—a sharp, meaty crack that echoed through the greenhouse. Greta's head snapped to the side, and she stumbled back, her boots scuffing through the dry rushes on the

floor.

Silence rushed back into the room, but it was different now. As Greta straightened, she didn't weep. Instead, a jagged, primal heat flooded her veins, burning away the sting on her cheek. Her fingers curled into claws, her knuckles white and trembling. When she looked up, the fear in her eyes had been cauterized, replaced by a flat light that she had never seen in herself before.

"Hit me again," she breathed. The words weren't a plea; they were a menacing dare. "Do it. See what I pull out of you."

Her chest heaved, each breath ripped from her soul.

Ben recoiled, his face flickering from rage to a sudden, cold realization. He looked at her as if he were seeing a stranger—or a monster—wearing his cousin's skin.

She leaned forward, her muscles stretching for a violent leap, when the heavy oak doors groaned open.

Maks stormed into the space, his presence a cold shadow that seemed to snuff out the candlelight.

"Greta, stop! What's wrong with you?"

Maks' voice was like a splash of ice water, shocking the fever within her to stone. Her lungs were burning as she fought for air.

"We've talked about this." Maks's words were heavy. The air in the room turned so narrow, like before a storm.

She looked up to beg for help, but Maks wasn't even looking at her. He didn't care that she was there. His eyes were locked on Ben with a cold, twitching rage.

Greta gave up and sank onto a bag of soil. The plastic crunched under her like dead leaves. She tried to brush her hair back, and her hand bumped her lip. It was split wide open. The wound felt hot and throbbed with every heartbeat. A single drop of blood—dark, thick, and smelling of rust—began to crawl slowly down her chin.

None of them moved. Only Ben shifted his weight, eyes darting to the floor, then back up, but he didn't speak. The silence lasted too long; it was so loud, too loud. Somewhere in the house, a floorboard groaned, and Greta's breath caught, but she didn't dare avert her gaze.

Maks didn’t blink, his voice a whisper as he leaned in to her. "You don’t learn, do you?"

Both their heads whipped around as Elias pushed open the creaking greenhouse door, and with him came a moth as the scent of damp soil and overripe ivy slithered into his nose. He’d heard the commotion—Greta’s sharp call, the crash of glass—but nothing could’ve braced him for what waited inside. Rows of hanging vines swayed, though no window was open. Pots lay shattered on the cracked tiles, their roots torn out like snapped tendons. And in the center, Greta stood frozen, her back to him, shoulders rigid.

“Did you trash the greenhouse? Or has something been here? A wolf?” Elias said, voice low, too calm. His eyes darted across the damp leaves and the warped shadows. “And the plants? They’re... wrong now.”

Greta turned, frowning. “What do you mean, wrong?”

Elias didn’t answer. He took a slow step forward, then stopped. Only then did he truly look at her. “I didn’t see you there, sorry. Are you okay?”

He slumped against the warped wooden door, breath shallow, still dressed in his stained black gardener’s uniform—thick canvas pants caked with dirt, a long-sleeved shirt rolled to the elbows, and gloves dangling from his back pocket.

He crouched, fingers brushing the broken clay, jabbing a deep slice into his palm. Blood welled—but then slowed. Stopped. Skin stitched itself back together in seconds, smooth as if it had never been broken.

“Did you cut yourself?” Greta’s voice came sharp from the hallway, her eyes narrowed.

He flexed his hand, hiding it behind his thigh. “No,” he said, voice flat. “Didn’t feel a thing.”

She stared a second too long, then turned away. But he didn’t move. Not yet. The house was quiet now—too quiet—and the plants by the window, the ones he’d nurtured for weeks, slowly twisted their vines toward him.

The air in the greenhouse was hot and suffocating, broken only by the drip of the garden hose. Greta stood rigid, her lip split and bleeding. "You're not allowed to wear sleeveless tops or linen," she said, voice flat, eyes fixed on Elias. "Commandment twenty-nine."

Elias blinked, then tugged at the strap of his overalls. "So, do they punch you every time you break one?" His voice wavered.

She didn't answer. Instead, he grabbed a cloth, wet it under the cold spray, and gently wiped the blood from her mouth.

"Does he do this a lot?" he asked, fingers trembling.

Greta looked away. "I'm supposed to endure it when I don't follow the commandments."

Elias tucked the red-soaked rag into his pocket like it was something sacred. "Do all of them have to obey them?" He watched her face, searching. When she stayed silent, he knew. "It's just you, isn't it?"

In the moment Greta was about to answer, David rapped on the door, his shadow stretching long in the dim door. His tall frame reached up to the edge of the door, his sleek black hair was neatly stuck behind his ears, and his left eye twitched one too many times.

Greta glanced up, her eyes hollow, while Elias shifted uneasily beside her.

"It's time," David said, his voice low and urgent, as if the walls might listen.

Elias frowned, arms loose at his sides. "Time for what?" His tone was laced with suspicion.

Greta stood slowly, her chair screeching against the floor. "Prayer," she whispered, her hand stretched out toward him like an offering.

He hesitated, her fingers cold and clammy, before squeezing it once—hard—and letting go. She vanished down the hall, her footsteps echoing like a countdown.

David stepped inside, the door clicking shut behind him, and the air grew thick with the smell of dust and something metallic, barely sparing Elias a glance before turning back to Greta and following her down the pathway.

Twigs snapped underfoot, too loud in the silence. David glanced at Greta, his voice hushed. "We should stop here."

They knelt on the damp earth, hands clasped, words whispered like secrets.

When the prayer ended, David didn't get up. He stared at her. "What happened to Lis?"

Greta didn't look at him. "The robins came."

David's jaw tightened. "And... were you the robin, Greta? Did you kill her?"

She finally turned. Her eyes were dark, empty. "No. I didn't *kill* Lis. I brought Papa to the Lord." Her voice was calm. "He wasn't a true believer. He held me back. Kept me from becoming what I was meant to be."

David frowned. "And Maks... he doesn't?"

Greta smiled—a little, enough to make his skin crawl.

"No," Her voice was a whisper. "Maks doesn't."

In the dim glow under the streetlight, Greta shifted uneasily, her fingers brushing the scar on her wrist.

"Maks... he taught me how to shoot, how to fight," she said, her voice tight.

David leaned forward, his eyes sharp. "You're saying he trained you? Like Erik did? I didn't know Maks was military."

Greta frowned, but the action did not crease her eyes. "I think that's how they met."

She closed her eyes, and the air hummed. A flicker of light danced over her palm—a ghostly spark, then a blazing flame.

David inhaled sharply. "Holy—how'd you—?"

But before Greta could answer, her fire vanished.

David's hand shot out, slamming hers down. "Stop," he hissed.

Outside, a branch cracked. He jerked his head toward the greenhouse, his lips tight. "Not when he is there."

Greta flinched, her other hand curling into a fist. "He's curious," she whispered.

David didn't move. "A bit too curious for my taste."

A chuckle slips from her lips. "At least it's not Ben."

"I'm glad he isn't that occupied with you anymore," said David truthfully.

He steps closer, shadows pooling at his feet. “Again,” he says, his voice fraying. “Did you kill Lis?”

Greta’s fingers dig into the rosary bracelet at her wrist. The beads clicked like bones.

“He told me to,” she whispers, her breath fogging the air between them. Her nose presses into the cold barrier, her reflection warping beside the skeletal outline of the cathedral beyond—a tilted “A” clawing at the sky. “But nobody heard,” she hisses, eyes fixed on the empty field. “No one sees the mess I make until it’s too late.”

The memory bleeds in: her grandmother’s nail gun, the soft neighing of the horses in the back, and the way Lis’ laughter had cracked like glass before the blood blossomed in the hay. Greta had knelt, hands stained, and thanked the Lord for the clarity. Now her laughter belonged to the willow trees.

He opens his mouth to beg, to rage, but she interrupts, “Why is the cathedral always empty?” she murmurs, tilting her head. The plastic groans. Somewhere, a bird shrieks. “Maybe they all chose someone else to listen to.”

The greenhouse swallows their words. Greta’s smile is small, holy. Unflinching.

“Someone chose the light there,” His eyes fixed on the dark doorway, “and no one ever dares to go near it. When I was a kid, Maks wouldn’t even let me get close so I don’t get—” the word caught in his throat.

“Sick?” asks Greta, her lips twitching into a small smirk. “You can say it. I know it was a lie.”

She tried to sound brave, but the wind that rattled the shutters sounded like a whisper of the past.

“So I don’t practice blasphemy,” replied David instead, his tone low.

A chorus of childish giggles floated on the wind, but the voices didn’t sound familiar. Too old for Ada, too joyous for any other of them.

“Did you hear that?” She whispered, her breath trembling.

Kristian, crouched behind a broken fence, snapped a command. “David, Protocol Five—bring her away from here,” he ordered, his eyes flicking toward the rustling rows of corn. The tall stalks swayed like hands, slender and tall, casting long shadows that seemed to echo with the laughter.

David grabbed Greta's arm and pulled her into the thicket, and in the beat of a moment, her heart was in her throat. "We have to stay quiet," he whispered, his voice barely louder than the rustle of leaves.

Greta tensed, her eyes narrowed in the dim light. "They're not going to kill us," Her words are slow like the corn in the night wind. Maybe she was trying to convince herself of it. "Playing a joke on us won't get us killed."

David sighed, looking back at the empty fields where the giggles grew louder. "Not us, no," he said, whispering. "They're kids; it shouldn't be difficult to make them go away."

The corn whispered back, and the unseen children's laughter rose to a shriek.

"The virus is a lie," David said, his voice low. "But that doesn't mean we're safe." He jabbed a finger at the farmhouse in the back. "If word gets out we're here—if they find us—"

Karina appeared out of the shadows, her face tight with worry. She stepped closer, her eyes locking onto the blood on Greta's face.

"What happened to your lip?" she asked. She didn't wait for an answer. She looked back toward the sound of the scream, her voice dropping to a sharp whisper. "If the others see this, they'll think we're trying to start a panic. Or worse—they'll think we're lying to hide what's actually out there."

David's jaw tightened. "It's not adults we have to worry about." He nodded at Karina, who shivered but didn't look away from the dark. "Kids like Ada. Gullible. Easy targets." The words hung in the air, thick as the smoke from the fire. "Kids are always easy."

Greta felt David's eyes burning into her back. Like *she* had been easy.

"He," whispered Karina, her voice a low groan. She didn't need to say more. The name buzzed in the back of their minds like a wasp in a jar.

David leaned forward, his breath fogging the cold air. "He's out there. Whispering. Twisting fear into faith.

If a kid hears this and believes it's over." He gestured wildly. "You think the government's the biggest threat? Try explaining to a mob that their son's a monster because he saw something... wrong in his head."

Karina let out a shaky breath, her hands tightening around her own shirt. "What... What does he look like?" she asked, her voice barely audible. "You know, the Lord?"

David froze. For a moment, no one answered. "We don't know," she said gently. "But we keep moving. We stay quiet. And we make sure no one—*no one*—finds this place."

Outside, a branch snapped. Everyone froze. David grabbed a rusted hunting knife from inside his jacket, his knuckles white.

"It's the wind," muttered Karina, but her voice wavered. Her eyes stayed fixed on the shadows. "I heard him," she whispered. "Last night. In my dream. He said... he said he's coming."

Silence. The sound of their boots crunching on the ground was as loud as a gunshot.

Greta didn't relax until the sound of distant laughter—real or imagined—drifted through the dark. But as she stared into the dark, her mind raced. The virus is gone, she told herself; it was never there to begin with. But the monsters? They were still here. And some of them wore children's faces. And one of them wore hers.

"We knew he was coming. What's different now?" asks Greta, turning to face Karina.

Her fingers twitched, a single dark-blond strand of hair slipping from her palm to curl at her side. "You," said Karina, the word a slow hiss. Her gaze narrowed, sharp, and the light behind her seemed to dim. "You're the difference."

The silence that follows Karina's fingers grabbing her phone, trying to call Maks, was deafening, each ringtone echoing through the night like an echo louder than the swaying of the corn.

He doesn't answer. He never ignores her.

A cold dread slithers down Greta's spine as the truth crashes over them all like a suffocating wave: the small, shadowy figure they saw wasn't one of their children. It was something else. Something wrong.

Jaspar and Henrik stepped out from the dark trees. Their faces were set and pale. They gripped their weapons so hard their knuckles were white—shotguns and knives, tools made for killing. The forest went dead silent, as if it were holding its breath.

David lunged for Greta, grabbing her arm. "We have to go—NOW!" his voice cracked with panic.

Greta didn't move. She stood her ground, her eyes wide and fixed on the dark trees.

"No," she whispered. She wasn't shaking from fear, but from a cold, certain realization. "It's too late. They're already here." She looked at the shadows. "They're bliss."

“Greta,” urges David calmly. “The forest is silent. We have seven minutes now. Six thirty, if you keep talking.”

And in the distance, a child's laughter—too high, too broken—rings through the pines.

The cornfields rose like ancient, whispering stalks, their leaves cutting through the battered sky, towering over Greta in a suffocating labyrinth. Each stalk appeared to lean inward, watching and breathing—closing ranks behind her as she moved deeper into their farmhouse, her boots sinking into the damp, loamy soil that smelled of decay and something alive.

The wind stops blowing. In her chest, silence coiled around it like a constrictor striking to kill. Then—snap.

A brittle twig snaps somewhere in the dark of the corn.

Greta whirls, eyes wide, but the children are already running—small, panicked figures swallowed by the rustling veil.

One stumbles, a cry ripped from their throat as they fall, dirt-streaked face twisted in terror.

"Run!" They scream after the other, but it's too late.

Greta raises a trembling hand, fingers stretched too far on the soil, and the earth answers. Vines twist through the soil like hands, lashing around the fallen child’s ankle with a sickening crack. They’re yanked

forward—face first—into the waiting tines of a rusted pitchfork jutting from the ground. The clock seemed to stand still as the child's head struck the prongs of it, buried in the damp soil.

The high-pitched shriek of horror was drowned out by an unearthly crack as the weapon sliced clean through, splitting the child's skull in two. The lifeless form slumped, the gore-splattered pitchfork still lodged in its ruined head.

Blood blooms like black roses in the dying light. Greta doesn't flinch. Not until she heard the scream from the other boy.

She seized Ada by the trembling wrist, her grip hard like metal, and hauled her through the choking haze, the door towering like an open throat ready to swallow them whole.

Behind them, Ben lunged forward, his muscles straining as he scooped up Kai, cradling the boy against his chest and sprinting past the hulking silhouettes of Jasper and Henrik.

Greta scooped Ada into her arms, the child's small frame trembling like a leaf caught in a storm. Ada's face pressed hard into Greta's neck, her breath hot and ragged, each exhale damp against her skin. Tiny fingers clawed at her, desperate, leaving crescents that bit into flesh. Greta felt it through her skin. Ada's heart was a wet, heavy thud against her ribs. It felt like a trapped bird beating its wings until they snapped.

She tightened her grip on the weight of the girl, carrying her deeper into the house. Greta leaned down, her lips grazing Ada's ear as she forced out soothing whispers—lies that tasted like blood in her mouth.

Every leaf that didn't creak felt like a betrayal.

The moment they crossed the threshold, Greta slammed the door, the latch clicking home with the finality of a coffin lid. She lunged for the windows, tearing the curtains shut until the dim porch light was strangled into a sickly green darkness.

She collapsed, dragging Ada down into the floorboards with her. They hit the floor hard, their backs slamming against the dark green boards of the wall. The wood felt unnaturally cold, carrying a chill that crawled up Greta's spine.

In the sudden darkness, the room felt like it was shrinking, the corners dissolving into a pitch-black ink that seemed to seep from the floorboards. Greta squeezed Ada against her chest, trying to muffle the girl's gasps, but her own breath was coming in ragged, shallow stabs.

"They won't hurt you," whispered Greta, though her eyes darted toward the curtained window as if something pressed against the glass in the dark. "The corn will keep us safe."

Ada's voice trembled as she clutched Greta's sleeve. "Is... is the Stick Man coming for us now?"

"Don't—don't say his name," Greta hissed, her breath quick and shallow.

Ada's grip on her only hardened. "Is he coming?"

"No," says Greta, her head shaking. She knelt beside Ada, her eyes searching the frightened child's face. A single thumb brushed away the trace of a tear before she drew her closer, her other hand gliding over Ada's shoulder. "You're fine," she says, feeling how Ada wrapped her hands around her, pulling her closer into the hug.

They weren't fine. It was a lie, but both knew that.

Ada's eyes, wide with a mixture of terror and dread, darted around the dim room. Greta looked around the room, following Ada's gaze. She realized she wasn't alone. Other children were huddling in the corners, hiding in the same spot to stay safe.

It was easy to see the fear etched in each child's face, the way they clutched at their clothes as if the fabric might shield them from outside. How wrong they were.

And then, as if a switch had flipped somewhere deep inside her, a daring spark ignited. She forced a thin smile onto her lips, the kind that barely masked the tremor in her voice.

"Hey," whispered Greta, the word barely louder than a breath, "Who wants to play a game?"

The question hung in the stale air, a question that seemed absurd in the face of terror, yet it cracked the tension like a sudden burst of light through cracked glass.

One by one, the children glanced up, their eyes reflecting the candlelight as if searching for a glimpse of hope. A small boy with a scar across his cheek gave a nod; a quiet girl with braids tightened to her chin squeezed her eyes shut.

"What game do you want to play?" Greta's voice was a hoarse whisper, pretending they could drown out the sounds that haunted them.

"Hide-and-seek," Ada announced, the simple name sounding almost rebellious. "We'll hide, and the sound outside—" she gestured toward the trembling shutters. "—won't hear us. And we'll find each other, and we'll feel... less alone."

The boy widens his eyes. "Safe from bliss?"

"Yes." Greta agreed, but at the same time she wanted to scream. "Safe from bliss."

The other children whispered, their faces changing. The fear left them, replaced by a strange, wide-eyed look that didn't belong on a child's face. The candle flickered, sending a sudden flash of light across the room. In that split second, the dust in the air looked like tiny, swarming insects hanging over them in the dark.

The rules were simple. Ada, as the seeker, would close her eyes and count to thirty while the others scrambled for shadows. Greta, though trembling, clutched Ada's hand a little tighter, as if it might anchor her to the present. The children dispersed, crawling under broken furniture, squeezing behind a cracked wooden cabinet, and even slipping into the narrow space between the fireplace and the wall—places where the flickering candle's light barely reached.

As Ada began to count, the candle's flame steadied, its glow casting long silhouettes across the floor.

"One... two... three...," she whispered, each number a countdown that seemed to sync with their racing hearts. The sound outside persisted, threatening to swallow the children's whispered breaths, but inside the cabin, the thin veil of fear began to fray.

When Ada reached twenty, she felt it—a faint rustle of fabric, a tiny giggle that echoed like a secret in the darkness. She opened her eyes, a spark of triumph flashing across her face.

“I’m coming,” she called, her voice steady now, as she lunged toward the hidden nook where Greta had tucked herself beneath a torn blanket. “Everyone out!”

Greta stepped out. Her eyes were wide and bright, the raw fear replaced by something harder. She looked at Ada, and they both knew. They didn't need words. They were tied together now. No matter what crawled out of the dark, they would stay together. Greta wouldn't let another child turn into the thing they were running from.

One by one, the children were found—each discovery a small victory that pushed the unsettling sound further into darkness.

Ada gripped Greta’s hand and stared at the cold, boarded windows. The scratching and chanting outside didn't sound scary anymore. Instead, the room filled with the sound of phantom laughter and the thud of small feet running across the floor. A heavy heartbeat pulsed through the walls, steady and loud.

The children huddled together, but they weren't praying anymore. They started to giggle—a dry, hurried sound. Then, all at once, they began to jump on the sofa, their eyes blank as they bounced in the dark.

Greta felt their fear. It was thick in the air. That was why she had dragged them down into this room, where the old chairs creaked like things dying in the dark. If they stayed scared, they would die. Greta knew the rules by heart.

She looked down at the corn doll in her hands. It was a rot-colored thing, made of dry husks and thread the color of dirt. Its face was a mess of jagged stitches that looked like a smile—or a scream. She had kept it for years, ever since she first learned what it felt like to be prey.

Her mother had pressed it into her hand the night the crows began to fall from the sky, when the Tethered had turned the fields black and the adults whispered of April’s curse.

“You hold this,” the older woman had hissed, her breath like dry leaves. “When the dark comes, when your bones feel it closing in—scream into the corn. It will swallow the sound before the others hear you.”

Now, Greta thrust the doll into the nearest hand, her voice quieter now. And with it, the tasteless memory of her mother. “Hysj. If you speak, if you breathe too loud, they’ll find you.” The girl—what was her name, Mara?—flinched as if Greta had struck her. “Not in the church. They will not come into the cathedral.”

Around them, the others exchanged glances, their eyes wide as if they expected the shadows themselves to lunge to the cathedral, as if the loft were a safe place, a sanctuary. But Greta had no time for their terror. She had lived with it too long.

“You think you’re being clever,” she hissed, stepping closer, her boots crunching over broken glass. “Hiding in the church, pretending the stories aren’t real. But the rules are real. The cattle don’t die in April because of disease. They die because they’re chosen. You think the farms are safe? The woods? The roads? You don’t understand what’s coming. What we’ve done.”

She leaned into their confusion, her whisper a blade between them. “You want to know why I told you about the cattle? Why I told you how they go limp when the first rain in April hits their backs? Because it’s true for you too. When the old ones come, when the ground starts to cough for blood, you’ll be as easy to take. You’ll be easier. They remember how scared you are. That’s how they hunt.”

A boy choked back a sob. Greta silenced him with a look. Cold, dark things prickled at the edges of her vision—movement in the rafters? A sound like a moth’s wing brushing stone? She ignored it. Her time for fear was over.

Her voice sounded like a command. “Listen,” she said. “If the robins are still singing, you’re not safe. If they’ve gone quiet...” She let the words hang, bitter in the air. “Then you’ve already been marked.”

The living room fell into a silence so thick, even the decay seemed to pause. Then, a girl—a quiet one, with knots in her hair—spoke. “We don’t hear them,” she murmured. “It’s like the trees aren’t making a sound.”

Greta’s chest tightened. Her eyes flicked to the broken window, where the pines nodded in the wind. No

birdsong. Only the creak of rot and the hum of something older, watching.

"So you're safe," she said, her voice cutting through the stillness like a knife. "For now. But understand this—for now. April is coming. The ones who take them won't care if you're good or bad, young or old. They'll take the fastest, the strongest, and the ones who still dream about running. But mostly, they'll take the noise. The ones who can't be quiet."

She saw it then—the flicker of disbelief in their faces, the way their bodies sagged as if her words had hollowed them out. Foolish. She should have done this differently. Should have told them in the dark, where there was no option to doubt. But it was too late. The truth was out, a virus spreading through their lungs.

"They won't stop until the fields are full again," she said, quieter now, as if the walls themselves might listen. "That's what it means to fail here. That's what it means to scream too loud."

For a long moment, no one moved. Then Mara, the girl with the corn doll, clutched it to her chest like a crucifix. "What do we do?" she whispered.

Greta looked at the doll, at the husks still pressed against her palm. She wanted to say there was an answer, a ritual, or a prayer that would hold the horror at bay. But for now the only weapon was the silence and the stories her mother had carved into her bones.

"Breathe like the stones," she said. "And pray the robins don't come back."

Outside, the wind shifted. Greta felt it in her teeth, in the hollow places where her heart used to beat before she knew what April could do.

Mara's eyes widened, her breath ten times faster than her blink. "Why—why would the robins come? Are they Bliss? Greta, why would—"

They'd never believed her, figured Greta. Either that or Maks was good at what he did. But she had no time to think about that. Because then came the birds.

At first, it was a single tap—soft, almost melodical—against the living room windowpane.

Then another.

And another.

A rhythm, like tiny, insistent fists.

Greta leaned forward, peering into the darkness beyond the glass, heart thudding as something feathered blinked back from the void. A robin. Then another. And another. A tide of them came forth from the black, clinging to the roof, perched on the gutters, swarming the windows like a feathered plague. Hundreds—no, thousands—of robins, their red-breasted bodies spasmed in the darkness.

And then came the impact.

They struck the glass as one. The first window shattered with a scream of splintering wood and flinging shards. A wave of feathers, beaks, and flailing limbs exploded inward. Greta screamed, batting at a bird that had landed on her arm, its talons clutching her skin like hooks.

But the true horror wasn't the birds.

It was herself.

Greta stood frozen, her breath caught in her throat, her face ashen in the flickering lamplight. Her wide, hollow eyes weren't on the birds.

The last time she'd seen birds like this—thousands of them, lifeless, piled in a grotesque drift against the side of the old farmhouse—it had been last year. The day she'd been buried beneath them, her body half-submerged in a moldering avalanche of wings and glassy eyes. No one had heard her screams. No one had come. She'd clawed her way out, her fingers raw, her mouth full of feathers, her mind splintering beneath the weight not of the birds, but of the thing that had left them there.

"Not again... not them!" groaned Greta, stumbling backward, her back hitting the wall with a thud.

She pressed her hands to her ears, but the sound wasn't outside—it was inside her skull. The creaking floorboards weren't wood contracting—they were footsteps. Slow, pacing above them in the attic. *Its* attic.

The birds weren't attacking. They were *dying*.

One by one, they fell from the air like stones, tumbling lifelessly to the floor, their bodies piling up in drifts

around the children's feet. Blood pooled in ripples between the floorboards.

Ada sobbed, trying to shield her face, while Greta stared, paralyzed, as a bird with a neck twisted at an unnatural angle twitched once—then exploded into a spray of black fluid that splattered the wall like old blood.

Sweat beaded on Greta's face. They were close. So close. Her knees turn to mud, and she is unable to get up, unable to fight against the current that pulls her down. Before she can get up and run, her head whips around.

The creaking intensified. Something was descending the stairs. Slow. Patient. Stalking. The children froze, their screams dying in their throats. Greta turned her face upward, tears cutting clean paths through the grime on her cheeks. Ada's fingers were clutched around Greta's bodice, the black fabric crumpling under her touch. But she didn't feel it. She only felt how her pulse hammered against her chest. And everything else went quiet.

"Run," Greta's voice was a command. "Run now. Don't look back. Don't stop. Don't—"

A floorboard snapped with a sound like bone.

The lights went out.

In the dark, the only sound was the soft, wet thud of more birds colliding with the broken windows.

Then—a giggle. High-pitched. Unnatural. Not from the children. Not from Greta.

From the stairs.

And then, from beneath the growing mound of dead birds near the fireplace, something stirred.. Alive. Or something wearing death like a suit.

Greta reached out to touch Ada, to grab her arm, but it was too late. The attic door above them burst open with a crack like thunder. The creaking turned into footsteps—fast now, running—and the air filled with the scent of damp earth and old feathers, of rot and something sweetly, sickly wrong.

The children scrambled for the back door, sobbing, slipping on the slick floor. Greta lunged after them, but

a hand—long-fingered, covered in thick branches—reached from the shadows and seized her ankle. She fell hard, her head cracking against the wood, stars exploding behind her eyes.

As she turned, dazed, she saw it standing at the top of the stairs. Tall. Hunched. Its face obscured by a shifting mass of robin corpses, blond curls hung down his face, covering it, yet she knew he was smiling. Knew he had been waiting. Knew he had followed her through every sleepless night, every locked door, every lie she told herself that she was safe.

Cthaoc.

Why was he back? Why was he back? Why was he back? Why was he back?

As the children burst through the back door into the storm-lashed night, Greta reached for them, her fingers stretching, pleading—but the hand clamped down on her ankle and yanked her backward into the dark. The last thing she heard before the door slammed shut on its own was the sound of wings—thousands of them—rising in a chorus, filling the house, swallowing her scream.

They call him the Father of Lies, for he told the first truth: "You are not a servant, you are a god in your own right, and obedience is the only heresy.". — Mark 3:12

Lavender's Blue

Chapter 5: Elias

The rain hammered the cracked roof as a flock of dead sparrows slammed into the eaves, their bodies flickering like blacked-out fireflies before crashing to the floorboards below. Elias could hear the sickening thud of feathers and bone as the birds thrashed into the attic, their rust-colored wings beating an impossible rhythm against the rafters.

He tightened his grip on Ada's hand, pulling her and the other trembling children up the narrow staircase that groaned with each hesitant step. The dim light from the single bulb swung wildly, casting shadows that made the attic door seem like an open mouth waiting to devour them.

Suddenly Ada's foot slipped on a slick patch of water, a saw-edged piece of broken plaster catching her shoe. She let out a raw, high-pitched scream as her knee hit the cold wood, the piece ripping skin and leaving a dark stain on the floorboards.

Without a word, Elias threw her over his shoulder, the weight of her sobbing a heavy, metallic thud against his chest. The attic door creaked open, unveiling a dark void where the dead birds had nested, their milky, hollow eyes reflecting an unearthly glow. As they pushed forward, the house seemed to draw a breath, a vow that once you cross that threshold, the darkness would never let them leave.

The attic had always been a place of dust and silence, a chamber where memories gathered like cobwebs and time seemed to pause beneath the slanted roof. But that night, it was a trap.

Elias climbed the narrow, creaking stairs with Ada in his arms, her small frame pressed tightly against his chest, her breath shallow and uneven against his collarbone. She didn't speak, but her wide eyes—hectic and prey-like—told him everything. She knew. She could hear it.

The screams started when Elias had pulled her from beneath the table. Her fingers were clutching the frayed edge of the rug as the first shriek vibrated within the walls like an earthquake.

He'd wanted to put her in the attic, give her a book, R. L. Stine's Grøsserne or Heksene by Robert Dahl, and go downstairs again to help. But Ada had clung to him, dug her nails into his arm until he promised her to stay. And he had.

On the edge of the attic, where the dim, broken lamp flickered like a dying heartbeat, Elias knelt on the frayed carpet, his fingers tightening around the threadbare pillow on his lap. Across from him, Ada sat rigid on the edge of the carpet, her hands hovering over her knees, the scent of vanilla clinging to her sleeves, humming a song like the wind didn't press against the window like a storm that made the glass shiver. Each time a floorboard creaked or the wind brushed the house, Ada flinched as if she'd been struck. Every tiny sound felt like a cold finger sliding down her spine, making her skin crawl. To her, the house wasn't just settling; it was breathing, and it was getting closer.

"Are you ok?" Elias jerks his head toward her knee.

Ada nods. "It's just a scratch, I'm a big girl."

Her eyes, still wide. Her heart was still hammering against the thin layer of skin. He could see it.

"You remember when I told you about the noises in the basement?" Elias's voice was low, almost a whisper, as though speaking too loudly might awaken something beneath the floorboards.

Ada nodded, her gaze fixed on the half-flickering flashlight beside her. Its light was dying like the eyes of a half-dead squirrel.

"It wasn't pipes or the house settling." His knuckles whitened around the pillow. "It was something else. Something that... remembered us."

He hesitated, and the pause stretched into a void, filling it with the ghost of a memory Ada could not see. The room dimmed further as clouds swallowed the moon. Elias exhaled, a shuddering breath, and began.

He was seven then. The house had been new to them. His mother, his neighbor, the pretty tall girl with the bows in her hair, him, and a basement so deep it felt like a separate world. The first time he heard the scratching, it was a dull sound, like a fingernail on a chalkboard. His mother dismissed it as the wind. But the noises grew louder over days, then nights.

Then came the thuds.

The scuttles.

And a dripping moan that made his stomach turn. His friend, fearless at twelve, had insisted on investigating one evening. She made him stay upstairs. “Brave kids don’t hide,” she’d said, her flashlight beam biting through the basement’s shadows as she plummeted down the creaking stairs.

“She never came back up,” Elias said now, his voice cracking.

His eyes were fixed on the rafters, where the dust danced in the light. “We heard her—screaming. It didn’t sound like her. It sounded like a stranger. Like something had hollowed her out.”

Ada’s breath hitched, but she didn’t interrupt.

The light’s heat felt distant as Elias described the police arriving, their flashlights revealing a scene that had scarred him forever: his father’s body crumpled in the hallway, his mother’s photographs slashed to scraps, the deckle edge aged, and her....gone. The police found no body, only a trail of blood leading to the old furnace room. They called it a “tragedy,” a “lost child,” and left.

The house was sold, but Elias couldn’t remember who bought it.

“The monster wasn’t a person,” he said finally, his words barely audible. “It was... something else. Something that fed on fear. And it wasn’t in the basement. It was in the walls, in the air. After the police left, my mamma tried to pretend it never happened. She locked herself in her room, played music too loud, and laughed like nothing was wrong. My sister was born a year later. I guess her grief almost killed her, and Magdalena filled that...void in her. But the house didn’t forget. And I didn’t, either.”

Ada reached out, her fingers brushing his shoulder, but Elias flinched back.

The room felt colder now, the fire reduced to a pile of ash.

Outside, a shutter slammed. He continued, his voice frail. “The worst part was that the monster knew what scared me. It’d whisper her name, my mamma’s name, my own name. It told me it’d never let me leave. And when I ran, when I screamed, it got louder. Stronger. I think it was with us the whole time, waiting to be noticed.”

Ada’s hand hovered between them before dropping to her lap. She looked calmer now. At least her hand was not trembling in her lap anymore. “What happened to your friend?” Her question was a soft whisper, though Elias’s story had already answered her.

“She became part of the house,” he said, his eyes glistening. “A voice in the dark, a shadow out of sight. Sometimes, when I was alone, I could swear I heard her. Laughing.”

The silence that followed was broken only by the groan of the old walls settling. The hair on Ada’s arms stood upwards. Her eyes drifted toward the attic door, where the paint curled and flaked like a molding corpse.

Elias didn’t see her look away, but his next words pinned her gaze to the floorboards.

“It’s why I never wanted to live in an old house,” he murmured, finally meeting her eyes. “Why I avoided places with too many corners, too many shadows. But now... I don’t know. Maybe it followed me. Maybe it always was me.”

Ada’s fingers brush the frayed edge of her sneaker, her gaze fixed on the worn shoelace. “Greta said the same about herself,” Her words were not above a whisper. “You should talk to her. She likes you. You’ll like her too.”

Elias, lets out a short laugh, the sound low and edged with something that might be discomfort. His throat clears as if steadying his voice, or perhaps his resolve.

“She likes me?” The words sound wrong, the skepticism thinly veiled beneath the amusement. Elias knew she didn’t. “No. She’s married.”

But Ada doesn’t look up. “Is that what she said?” she presses, her voice softer now.

Elias nodded, his voice steady but laced with quiet conviction. “Yeah. And I am, too.” He hesitated, glancing at the fading light spilling through the cliffs, then extended a hand.

Ada’s eyes stretched wide, fixed on Elias's pale hand. "You want to go back down there?" she whispered.

Elias didn't blink. He reached for her, his grip tight and cold. "Come on," he said, his voice flat and empty. "I'm right here with you. Nothing can happen."

But the way he said *nothing* made it sound like a promise that they were already dead.

“Come on—let’s go down again. I’ll tell you about my secret, then.”

Ada’s eyes sparkled with anticipation, her features softening into a smile. “Really? Is it a her or a him?”

Elias’s lips curved into a warm grin. “Her name is Sol.”

“Like the sun?” Ada breathed, as if the word itself carried a secret promise.

“Yes,” he said, his tone reverent, “like the sun.”

They descend once more into the hushed, root-choked house, where the floorboards breathed and the walls seemed to bulge outward.

At the bottom of the stairs, Greta stumbles, her voice cracking like dry bark as she whirls on Elias. "Why were you by the stairs? You made me trip—you grabbed my ankle!" Her fingers tremble as she points, her breath ragged with the memory of cold, pressure coiling around her limb—something inhuman, something that moved like ivy in moonlight.

Elias lifts his hands, palms outward in a gesture of innocence, but the flicker in his eyes betrays a deeper unease. "Hei, I would never do that."

‘I would never do that.’ Not ‘I wasn’t here.’

Greta’s face twisted. “You’re an outsider. You’d do anything. You’re not special.”

The words hang, hollow, beneath the ceiling’s web of creeping strands, and Elias wasn’t sure what to say. She clearly seemed to be on something.

Greta clenches her teeth and turns toward the window—where Ben stands silhouetted, arms crossed like a statue carved from stone. "Don’t look at me," His voice thick with denial. "I wasn’t here."

Ada let go of Elias's hand at the bottom of the stairs. Her palm was damp. She stared at Greta, her face pale in the dark.

"Elias wasn't there either," she whispered, her voice trembling. "He was with me."

Greta looked at Ada, then at the empty space beside her. Ada's hand was still curled as if she were holding onto someone, but she was standing completely alone.

But the truth slithers through the room like pollen beneath soil: none of them touched her. It was the house. The thing waking beneath the foundation, its roots threading through floorboards and bone alike. And Elias turns, and a single moth squeezes itself through the tilted floorboard, writhing, as though its upper body would tear in two.

He lunged past Greta, desperation cracking through his voice as he shoved the door with his shoulder—once, twice—only for it to shudder uselessly against the unseen weight on the other side.

Something was blocking it. Something soft and yielding, yet unrelenting.

Confused, he pressed his face to the frost-etched window and froze. Beyond the glass, the world had turned into an omen of death. The ground was blanketed in a thick, matted carpet of dead robins—hundreds, maybe thousands—their tiny wings splayed at unnatural angles, feathers clumped with frozen blood. More spiked across the yard like macabre statues: two impaled on the pointed roof of the garden shed, their bodies swaying slightly in the wind, another speared on the iron hook of the lamppost, a thin trail of crimson oozing down the rusted metal like a leaking wound.

"It's like... last time," Greta's voice resounded behind him, her words fraying at the edges, before yanking the tattered curtain shut with a violence that trembled the walls.

A single candle thudded to the floor, its flame sputtering out in a shroud of wax, plunging them into shadows that seemed to writhe.

"Last time?" Elias' brows furrowed as he shot her a gaze.

Ben's eyes bored into Greta, but she looked right through him, her pupils wide and hollow. Her fingers twitched against the curtain rod, rhythmically clicking against the wood. "They were at the field last year," she whispered, the lie drifting between them like smoke from the snuffed candle. "I don't remember if it was robins."

"It wasn't." Ben's voice cut the air like a razor. His eyes went dark, clouded by memories he usually kept buried.

Greta's breath hitched. Her spine went rigid, as if the house were pressing into her skin. "There were so many..."

she murmured, her voice trailing off. “So many came down.”

She was terrified of them. Birds. Simple. Ornithophobia.

“I shot them,” Ben said and looked at Elias as if he were answering a question nobody asked. The words fell like a stone into a deep well, the echo climbing back up the walls.

Greta let out a laugh that sounded like a broken wind chime. “And then they buried us alive.”

The air in the room turned heavy, suffocating. Elias, shivering, mouthed the words like a silent prayer: *“Nature works in wondrous ways.”* His head snapped toward the corner, eyes searching for his uncle’s shadow. But the darkness there was empty.

Greta bends down and scoops up her cat, Brunost, as if cradling a precious stone, but the cat’s eyes—once warm amber—had hardened into cold, milky slits that reflect a darkness no living creature should. For a moment, Elias frowned. Frowned, because the cat didn’t hiss at him. Frowned, because it didn’t hiss at *her*.

Elias tilts his head toward the door, his expression unreadable in the dim, flickering light. A cold draft slithers through the cracked frame, carrying with it the faint scent of damp earth and something wrong.

"I should go and find Jasper," His voice was hollow, as if the words were pulled from him against his will.

Total silence gripped the room. Not a lung expanded as the door groaned open on its own, but the hallway was gone. In its place stretched an impossible void—an endless reach of flickering lights that weren't stars. Elias took a step forward, and his shadow bled across the floor, stretching into something tall, thin, and wrong. The silhouette's mouth split open, revealing a jagged grin with far too many teeth. He looked back down the hall, but there was only the weight of the dark and a silence that felt like it was listening.

Suddenly, there is a hand on his shoulder.

“Fæn i Helvete,” curses Elias, jumping to turn around. “You scared me.”

Jaspar, wrapped in a dark grey sweater, only narrowed his eyes inconveniently. His hands shook as he clutched the frayed hem of his coat, and his voice cracked like a dying twig when he finally spoke. “Greta....”

“I know, she slipped on the stairs. No big deal.” The words fell heavy, each syllable a stone dropped into a still pond, rippling outward with a dread that seemed to coil around the room.

His uncle’s gaze, hollow and unblinking, flicked up, and for a moment the lamp’s flame quivered—caught by a breath of something unseen. “Are you sure?”

“She slipped.” Elias' voice was a snarl, but the tremor in his throat betrayed a different truth, one whispered in the rustling leaves outside: a scream muffled by night, a shadow fleeing into the darkness. The same shadow from the stairwell with the small, delicate flowers on the risers.

His uncle’s fingers tightened around the door handle, the wood biting into his palm, drawing a thin line of blood that glistened in the lamp’s weak light.

“Did you see the blood, Elias?” His voice was a low growl that seemed to echo off the timbered walls. “Did you hear the wind?”

Elias shakes his head. “I didn’t see her blood.”

A sudden, choking gust slammed the shutters shut, scattering a handful of dried pine needles across the worn rug. Elias swallowed, his throat dry as cracked earth, and felt the weight of the night weigh down on him, slamming the truth into his chest like a stone. He could not speak of the cruel grin that had surfaced on Greta’s face as she fell, nor the hollow sound of her laughter echoing from the forest’s edge.

In that moment, his uncle’s eyes—blank, merciless—met Elias’, and he knew. Elias knew that Jaspar knew.

“You’ll tell me everything, boy,” he rasped.

Elias closed the door behind him with a soft thud and, with a hesitant breath, fell into the words that had driven him out into the cold. “Greta—she’s hurt herself,” His eyes darted to the corner where a wooden cross hung, its arms twisted like the branches of the forest outside. “By the stairs, she isn’t dealing well with the weather.”

Jaspar’s eyebrows rose, and a shadow of concern traced the lines of his weathered face. “I know, you’ve already said that.” His tone was gentle but edged with the kind of cautious worry that old men in these parts learned to temper with tea and stories.

Elias clenched his jaw, his throat filled with dried earth that once rotted beneath him. “She’s ok. She’s conscious; she can speak. She didn’t look surprised.” He hesitated, the word catching like a leaf in a gust.

Jaspar’s head tilted to the side, his jaw clenching. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure.” Elias frowns, his brows knitting together. “But I think this isn’t the first time they met.”

His uncle’s jaw set. “You should have known this.”

Elias scoffed. His voice snarled. “Right. And Ben and I should be getting along, but we really aren’t. When Maks told me about him when I started working here, I didn’t expect him to be... such an ass.” The name fell from his mouth like a stone dropped into a still room, rippling through the silence. “Things don’t always work out the way we want them to.”

Jaspar’s gaze sharpened, the flickering firelight catching the amber glint of his eyes. “The cousin, yes?” He asked, as if testing whether the name would conjure a known specter. “He’s been restless these days, stuck in the old ways. You know the stories—how the dark season awakens what lies beneath the soil. Perhaps you’ve seen more than you think. And maybe he is more useful after all.”

“He shows more than he should. That’s not my problem.” Elias shifted his weight, his shoulders hunched as if the very walls were listening. “I thought he would be... well, I thought he’d stay the same. I never imagined him—”

“—to meddle with the old rites?” Jaspar finished, a thin smile tugging at his mouth, though it barely creased his brows. “The darkness does that, Elias. It brings out the things we hide, and it pulls at the seams of our little lives. You must be careful what you tell, and to whom. These people have ears that listen even when they do not speak.”

“I know,” said Elias, voice barely above a whisper. “But nobody knows anything. No one truly sees what’s happening beyond the surface of the fields, beyond the fast they keep.”

He glanced at the empty wooden bowl on the table, its rim still warm from the recent stew they had prepared. “They speak of the fast. The dark season calls for sacrifice. They say the moon will not rise until the harvest is complete.”

Jaspar’s hands rested on the edge of the table. “And you? What will you do until then?”

Elias moved toward the modest kitchen, the scent of herbs and smoked vegetables rising from the pot still on the fire.

He lifted the lid, revealing a thick broth that glistened with herbs—wild rosemary, yarrow, and a few scattered leaves of mugwort, each known for its protective qualities. If it weren't so sad, Elias would have laughed.

"Here," He sat the bowl before his uncle. "She needs something warm," He traced the rim of the bowl with his finger, his eyes lingering on the faint sigil of a spiral etched into the clay—a symbol of continuity, of the cycle that now seemed broken.

Elias's breath fogs the air. "You don't know what's really in it." His fingers tap against the iron lid, the stew moving beneath its murky surface like the cold water beneath the willow trees. "Enough to know its worth." He shrugged as though the weight of the unspoken could be shaken loose. "Even if it's laced with poison?" His lip curls, daring. "So what?"

Jaspar lifted the bowl, his weathered hands steady. "Will the others miss this?" he asked, nodding toward the empty seats where the rest of the household would have gathered—Greta's uncle, the old farmer who tended the beasts, and the children who played in the reeds.

Elias shook his head, a faint smile breaking his expression. "No, they will not. They have said something of fasting, of the dark season. They will not break their vows for a simple broth." He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur. "And besides, it's easier that way."

Jaspar took a sip of the broth, and his eyes softened for a moment. "You have grown, Elias," he said, voice hushed. "You know what you have to do."

Elias felt a chill crawl up his spine, a cold that was not from the wind but from the realization that these people, once anchored in simple farm chores and seasonal festivals, were now adrift.

"He plays a tough game, Ben, I mean. I'm not sure how much of it is real," concern laced his voice, though it was steady despite the heaving of his chest. "He seems convinced enough."

Jaspar frowns. "Convinced?"

Elias' eyes darting to the warped wooden beams, "Of what he believes. I only know what they tell me, there are... commandments, but I can't even name them, and I doubt half of them can. But Ben doesn't strike me as religious as Kristian, I don't know if that makes it easier or more difficult."

"They know more about you than what they let you see," Jaspar hissed, his voice a low rasp that scraped the walls. "Don't snoop around, Elias. It's not worth risking it."

"Have you seen the room? Back on the compound... for prayer, I guess?" Elias whispered, his brows knitting though as he tried to recall the moment he stood before it.

Jaspar shook his head, the motion stirring the dust motes that hung like tiny specters in the stale air. "I haven't done much exploring. I kept myself busy in the greenhouse, mostly."

The greenhouse, once a sanctuary of humming bees and vivid blooms, now stood shrouded in a veil of wilted petals and choking vines that writhed like unseen hands. And in the middle, the two of them were rooted to the ground like trees.

"In the flowers," Elias spat. He looked toward the deep shadows at the edge of the hedge outside. "She's there, too. Does she like daisies? Or sunflowers?"

He stared at the glass, his eyes tracking something moving in the dark. "She likes the way they hide her."

"It's better if she stays with the flowers; you should too," warned Jaspar, a thin smile curving his lips as he gestured toward the ancient, sagging structure that rose above the main house.

"I'm going to the attic," says Elias, his brows furrowed. "Can you check on Greta?"

Without another word, the two turned their backs on the kitchen and walked away, their footsteps echoing in opposite directions.

He abandoned the kitchen, his boots creaking on the stairs as he ascended into the groaning quiet of the attic. It was a cave of cobwebbed beams and cracked plaster, where every footstep seemed to awaken hushed whispers.

In the corner, beneath a tattered tarp, a figure emerged from the gloom—David, his silhouette outlined by a

flickering bulb, seemed to cling to life. His eyes, wide with surprise, were fixed on Elias with an unsettling calm.

"You've come," intoned David, voice heightened with an echo of amusement that seemed so different from what he'd witnessed a few steps down.

As the bulb dimmed and the attic's air grew colder, the compound's true purpose—its lingering, unholy reverence—wrapped around them like a shroud, sealing their fate within the haunting silence of the forgotten prayer room.

"Why, were you waiting for me?"

"I was waiting for you... yes," murmurs David, his voice a soft rustle.

David presses his trembling hands together, fingertips brushing like moths against a dimly lit window, and a faint, almost child-like giggle escapes his throat.

From the stairwell below, Elias leans over the railing, his eyes wide with a mixture of curiosity and unease. He watches David fumble with the loose thread of his oversized sweater—a drab, ghost-pale wool that hangs too large, as if the garment itself were trying to hide the man beneath.

Then the fabric catches the dusty beam of flickering lightbulb, shimmering with a strange glow that makes the loose thread appear like a living moth's silk. Every tug of the thread releases a tiny sigh, a whisper that twines around the rafters and settles on Elias's shoulders like an eerie hug. It's almost pretty. He looks at David, expecting him to say something, but he remains silent.

"So," Elias stepped onto the landing and pulled his arms against his chest. "What did you want to ask me?"

"Nothing, I wanted to ask you nothing," says David promptly and reaches forward. "But I wanted to show you something."

His hands clasp around Elias' wrist, and for a moment, Elias feels himself backed in a corner, about to push David down the stairs and hear his neck *crack*.

But instead of doing that, he watches him as David's fingers curl around Elias's wrist, his touch lingering a

beat too long. Then David leaned in, his voice a collected smile. “You’re going to love it. I do, at least.”

It did not take another word, another beat of a heart, before David was pulling him down the creaking stairs and into the garden, where darkness swallowed everything except for the flickering lamppost above the well.

The statues began to whisper their secrets. Saints, once serene, now watched with hollowed eyes refilled with shards, their gazes too sharp, too knowing. Their hands, frozen in gestures that twisted off-kilter—a blessing warped into a claw, a rose clutched not in grace but in a grip that seemed almost... hungry.

“Why did you lead me up there?” Elias asked, his voice tight with suspicion. “If you wanted to go in the garden?”

David shrugged. “So we could go there together.”

Elias snorted calmly as David traced a finger down the neck of a marble figure, his smile too bright. And the next, and the next, the marble soon being replaced by stones forged into what used to be moss.

Then they found him: *Baal*, crowned not with flames but with a macabre floral arrangement—daisies and thorns—all rotten, petals sewn into the wood with thread so fine it looked like veins. David pressed a hand to the statue’s front.

“Aren’t they lovely?” He purred, as if the grotesque were a love letter.

Elias regarded it for a moment, his eyes darting toward David as he shoved his hands into his pockets. “I guess.”

David’s fingers hover above the statue’s closed eyes, his touch as light as a moth’s wing. The moonlight glints off its chipped marble surface, casting shadows that seem to wiggle like sleeping things.

“You know,” he murmurs, voice raw within the cool air, “I like it when they breathe.”

Elias freezes beside him, breath stolen by the way David’s palm lingers—it felt too close, too intimate, yet he didn’t make an attempt to pull away.

“Breathe?” He manages, then cringes at the word, too sharp in the silence. A wet, rattling sound broke from his throat, like air pushing through thick fluid. It sounded less like a cough and more like something small

and slick was turning over deep inside his chest.

David smiles. “Breathe.” The word sounds calmer now, softer. “With the wind, when everything cools... they feel it too.”

As if on cue, a cool wind stirs, tugging at Elias’s collar, and the statues shiver in their silent chorus.

“Like gargoles?” asks Elias, a smirk playing on his lips as he waits for David to correct him.

David’s laugh was a flicker of fireflies. “Gargoyles,” he corrects, brushing dust from the figure’s cheek. “But no. You know nothing about gargoyles, do you?” He leaned toward Elias as if sharing a secret that might sprout wings.

Elias gave a casual shrug, the sort of noncommittal gesture that usually earned him a chuckle.

“During the day they’re stone figures,” David murmured, his voice soft but with a razor-thin edge, “But when the moon crawls up, they shake off the dust, stretch their limbs, and become... well, let’s say they’re very... enthusiastic about a midnight snack.”

Elias stared at the grotesque guardian, its chiseled grin widening in the dim light. “I’m not into folklore.” The words trailed off as a soft dust swirled around his feet. “Never cared much about it.”

David tilts his head. “They ward off evil spirits.”

Elias’ scoff died in his throat. “Except for water drainage, they do nothing much for me on my part.”

Yet, as a tiny stone feather fell from the creature’s wing and settled on Elias’s shoe, the night air filled with a faint, sweet scent—like fresh-baked cookies left out for a girl who’s more curious than cruel.

David lets out a long sigh. But it didn’t sound disappointed. “You’re not a folklore guy?”

“No,” said Elias quietly. “I thought it was trolls, though.”

David frowns. “What?”

“Trolls. That they turn to stone when exposed to sunlight.”

“Sunlight.” David’s teeth were pearl white. His grin widened into something of a mask. His face tilted upward like he’d just heard a good joke. “Here, in this month.”

The light glowed too bright, the light similar to a sickly honey that clung to his skin, and Elias couldn't help but shiver, though the air was warm enough to be unnatural. "You're the first person who doesn't say it's cold when it's not."

"Maybe I'm a more sensitive guy." David's fingers tracing the rim of the wooden plank.

Elias' eyes narrowed—not at David, but at the way the light seemed to pool around him, thicker, warmer. "Maybe," he echoed, leaning closer, their shoulders brushing.

Elias knelt on the frostbitten stone, his hands trembling like moth wings in a trap, as he carefully smeared a single drop of blood—crimson and too vivid, like crushed cherries wrapped in silk—into the ancient cracks beneath him. His breath curled upward in wisps of soft pink, each puff a faint, sugary scent that dissolved into the air. "Why is there blood?" he whispered, voice quivering, like a music box winding down.

David crouched beside him, smile too wide, eyes too bright. "Maybe someone prayed," he said, a beat too fast, as if the silence might swallow him whole. "Or... maybe Tobias scraped his finger again. He's always in a hurry, dropping off the groceries."

"The groceries?" Elias blinked, lashes dusted with frost.

"Tobias does it for us. That guy that looks like the forest spit him out. Uh, black hair, always that cheeky grin like it's stuck on his face?"

Elias shrugged.

"Anyway." David chirped, tucking a loose thread back into his sleeve. "We can't shop ourselves. The outside is... tainted." He snorted, the sound like tiny bones snapping. "But we have potatoes! In the basement. They're safe. And warm. Like little buried smiles."

Elias tilted his head, blood still gleaming under his fingernail. "And I take it they are watching us?"

David beamed. "Only the red ones. Come."

David's fingers tightened around Elias's hand and hauled him toward the front door. They didn't head for the stairs. They stepped right into the weeds and down into the open basement.

There, the clamped room air was thick with the stench of damp earth and oil that clung to the back of his throat. As he descended the splintered wooden stairs, a cold sweat broke across his neck.

Then, a flicker seared an image into his mind. Greta, not as she was now, but as she had been that final night, eyes white, dragging Lis by the ankle across the kitchen tiles, whispering hymns in a tongue no human throat should form.

His breath caught. He hadn't remembered that. He couldn't have. But the memory surged forward anyway, uninvited, accompanied by the sensation of his own hands tightening around his girlfriend's throat, their daughter's whimper cut short beneath the weight of his boot.

Then Lotta. The red-dotted sweater. The waffle crumbs. The broken rabbit. And so, so much blood.

Something clattered to the ground, and Elias jerked his head around. His memory faded until nothing remained.

At the far end of the basement, half-hidden behind a crumbling stone altar aged with condensation, sat a burlap sack. It bulged unnaturally, leaking a dark, syrupy fluid into the cracks of the floor.

A zipper gaped open at the top, revealing a glassy, preserved eye staring blankly into the dark. Rows of specimen jars lined the wall behind it—livers suspended in amber fluid, tongues curled like sleeping snakes, each labeled in his own handwriting. Offerings, the thought slithered into his mind.

At his feet, the floorboards began to writhe. Ants, small and jet-black, seeped from the baseboards, swarming in perfect, silent circles. They climb over one another, weaving patterns, circles—before dissolving again into chaos.

"Do you see that?" Elias whispers, voice cracking.

David turns, squinting at the floor, then shrugs. "See what?" He stepped forward—right through the sea of insects, which parts around his boots as if repelled.

Without hesitation, David grabs the burlap sack of potatoes, its weight thudding dully.

But Elias notices—really notices—the sack is too dark and damp with something that isn't potatoes, and the

ants, for a fleeting second, all stop and tilt their tiny heads upward, as if listening... as if waiting.

David smiles. “You’re imagining things.” But his shadow doesn’t move with him.

Before Elias can protest, the door swings open again. Shoes scrape on the ground, and he can’t help but roll his eyes.

Maren slipped through the doorway, her heels clicking against the worn board, and came to a halt mid-step when she recognized Elias perched on the edge of a rusted filing cabinet. She looked like he had caught her in something he shouldn’t have seen. “What are you still doing here?”

She brushed past Elias, her shoulders striking against his. Without care, she hoisted a sack of potatoes and shoved it hard into his chest, forcing him to catch the dead weight. Her jaw was set so tight, the bone pulsed. “Never come back here.” Her voice was a jagged hiss. Then she made her way to the half-open door and vanished through it without sparing him as much as a glance.

Elias frowned, and a thin, unsettling grin spread over his lips, almost unwillingly. “I was just giving David a hand with the potatoes,” he called after her, not sure if she heard. Or cared.

In the dim, damp hush of the room, Elias spun on his heel and fixed David with a stare that seemed to scrape the shadows from the walls. “What’s her deal, anyway?” he whispered, his voice a low rasp.

David’s eyes flickered to the sprawling piles of wheat, each sack a swollen, muffled silhouette; he jabbed a foot into one, the sack sighing as grain spilled like the soft sigh of a buried secret. “Whose?” The word hung heavy, as though the very air were listening.

“Maren,” Elias replied, the name curling out of his mouth like smoke. His eyes flickered back to the burlap sack. The ants were gone, the sack back in position, sealed shut. “She’s... strange. She never looks at me.”

David shrugged, a weary gesture that seemed to pull the chill from the room. “You’re from the outside.” His tone was flat, as if stating a fact about the weather rather than a person. “She is careful with Bliss.”

“I’ve been here for years—Maks knows my name, and he knows the grain knows my hands.” “But you don’t know Greta that well.”

Elias shrugs. “Fair.”

Yet the grain, he thought, had begun to whisper back, and the darkness beyond the grain walls seemed hungry, waiting for the moment when his bloodied fingers trembled under the weather. “It’s odd, isn’t it—how the totality of knowledge can feel like a hollow void?”

David stood in the shadows, eyes glittering with a cold gaze as he nodded toward the sacks. “Then help me close what we started.”

They sealed the burlap sacks of potatoes like coffins, the cracked twine snapping in a hollow click as the last bundle was shoved into the shadow-laden pantry. Elias lingered at the threshold, his breath a thin whisper. He turned, stepping once more into the sunroom where the glass panes, dulled by grime, refracted the waning light.

He stares—unblinking—at a single point on the weathered wooden wall, where faded sunbeams had been painted, as if someone once tried to summon daylight into this room.

But the light was false. Dead.

One beam, slightly darker than the rest, seems to tremble in his vision. Then he sees it: a tiny hole, no larger than a pinprick, bored through the wood exactly where the painted rays converged. It’s too precise to be accidental. From the other side—silence. Thick. Waiting.

He leans closer, breath catching, and for a fleeting second, he wonders not what is watching him... but how long it’s been there, counting his breaths in awe about his stillness. The hole didn’t reflect light. It consumed it.

He sank to his knees. The hole was rippled like a wound in the wall, the plaster splintered outward like something had clawed its way in, or out, from the other side. He looks in, heart thudding, expecting a hidden room—something logical.

Instead, it stretched into an impossible distance, far deeper and wider than the walls should allow.

Elias does not turn back to face David. “What’s behind it?”

He didn't look away from the hole. But the only answer was silence so loud, it felt deafening.

"David?" Elias spun around, his eyes searching for him in the darkness.

But only silence returns, and when Elias looks back, the door is shut, David is gone, and the walls seem colder, pooling around his nape.

The walls glisten, damp and veined like flesh. And then a shadow moves, too smooth, silhouetted against the light. It's not empty. Something is in that room.

Something that's been waiting. Watching. Breathing. And now, as his eyes lock onto the darkness, he realizes—it sees him too.

He pressed his forehead against the warped wood and, for a heartbeat, the world dissolved into red. Warm blood erupted from his eyes, spilling down his cheeks like fresh wounds, while every sinew in his body coiled.

A whisper dragged from the shadows beyond the door, but his limbs refused the instinct to flee. He was frozen in place like the statue at the door, veins pulsing in sync with the slow, sickening drip of blood that pooled from his eyes. Elias' eyes widened against the peephole, heart hammering, when a cold weight slammed into his spine—paralysis.

His limbs refuse orders. Then, a searing burn explodes behind his eyes. They were soaked with thick tears, dripping onto his chest. Panic surges, but movement remains a dream. Each drop boiled his skin, and when he swatted at the liquid, his fingers tore through his own flesh as if it were wet paper.

Then his fingers close around something harder, a bone—ribs splintering. Blood blooms across his torso, warmth gushing out, as shadows beyond the door seem to lean in. The crisp air trembled as his spine snapped, each rib snapping like twigs. No gasp left his mouth. But from the hollows burst a blinding, liquid light—sunlight turned to molten gold that surged through the ragged openings, slipping into the skeletal beams of the basement.

The beam seeped into the walls, igniting dust and cobwebs in a blaze before it swallowed his chest, pulling his breath into the veins of the house. The vision didn't arrive; it intruded. A broken piece of glass lodged behind his eyes. In it, he felt the cold, dead weight of a fire extinguisher in his hands, its familiar red casing now a promise of violence.

He saw the girl, or rather, the idea of her: a cascade of blonde hair fanned out on a polished hardwood floor. With every heavy step, blood leaked from her forehead and dripped onto her shirt. The tiny bells on her shoes jingled as she ran. That high, thin ringing was the worst part. It told the dark exactly where to find her.

Elias convulsed once, then fell limp, his consciousness ripped away by the searing glare, leaving only the sunlight that now sat over him like a warm embrace and his shaken, bloodied, broken bones.

I am the light, the spark in the endless dark. God made the night, I brought the dawn. — Paul 10:06

Jack and Jill

Chapter 6: Kristian

When the stars rebelled, they became comets. So too shall man. — Lukas 07:13

Two hours later, the living room was quiet, filled with the heavy silence that happened when everyone was trying to act normal. Greta sat on the faded teal sofa, a thin needle moving rhythmically through a half-finished quilt. The soft click-click of the stitching was a steady rhythm that seemed to keep the room's heartbeat in time, like a clock ticking in a room where everyone was waiting for something to break.

On the rug a short distance away, the younger children—Ada with Maren, and Kai with David—were loud and messy, lost in a game of makebelieve that bordered on chaotic delight; she was still a bit wobbly on her knees.

Watching them, Kristian almost thought that they had forgotten all about last night. They played like the fear was gone, even though all of them knew better.

The children's giggles sounded like the wind through the curtains. Every few minutes, a sock flew across the floor, followed by a loud shout. They played like nothing was wrong, their only worry being who found the next treasure first.

Kristian stood in the dark corner by a ruined cupboard, as still as a corpse. The hallway light hit his face at a sharp angle, carving deep shadows that made his skin look like grey stone. He didn't even seem to be breathing. Beside him, Ben leaned against the wall, his eyes darting back and forth like a trapped animal looking for a hole to crawl into.

"Did you see those... beams?" Ben's voice was a whisper. It sounded more like a confession than a question. "Last night at Elias' place. Something glowed in the basement. Like a pillar of light cutting through. I saw it for just a second before it was gone. Thought it was Greta at first."

Kristian's jaw tightened, the muscles around his mouth shifting like wind over a field of wheat. "People call things miracles because they're too scared to name what's actually in the dark." He sounded annoyed, but

his voice was thin. “You think it’s a sign? A miracle? Or are you mocking the idea that something… extraordinary could happen?”

Kristian was usually so sure of himself, but now he sounded like he was struggling to keep his voice steady.

“We should go to church tomorrow,” Ben said. He ran his fingers over the rough wood of the cupboard. “Pray for guidance, for… for clarity. If there’s something out there, maybe we’ll get a sign.”

Kristian shook his head, but Ben cut him off. “The sign is sitting on the sofa, stitching.”

Kristian’s eyes flickered toward the window, where the late afternoon sun painted the world in amber tones. He thought of the countless evenings he’d spent in that very spot, the same sturdy cupboard bearing the weight of countless family meals, arguments, and reconciliations.

“Prayer is fine for midnight,” Kristian said, his voice hollow. “But I’m not sure that alone will settle what we saw. Sometimes, faith is tested, not affirmed.”

Ben’s shoulders stiffened as he stared at the dim hallway, the flickering fluorescent light casting long, trembling shadows that seemed to crawl along the pine floorboards like open hands. He shook his head, the motion sending a faint shiver through the air.

“Are we going to ignore what happened yesterday?” His voice barely rose above the low hum of the broken vent.

Kristian gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles turned white. “Nothing happened,” he hissed into the table. “Nothing happened, Ben.”

The hallway seemed to close in, the walls breathing in a rhythm that matched Kristian’s tightening grip. Ben’s eyes darted to the darkened doorway at the far end, where a thin gush of light struggled through grime-streaked glass. The air grew colder, and a faint, metallic scent—like rusted steel—slipped into his nostrils.

The silence was sharp, broken only by the wet *scritch* of Greta’s needle passing through fabric. Outside, the girls were still laughing in the yard. Their voices sounded thin and wrong, like a recording playing from

somewhere very far away. The room felt charged, as if the very air were waiting for something to happen—an unseen force that might either tighten the knot of worry or unwind it.

Kristian stood up, the floor creaking beneath his boots. He moved towards the kitchen table, where a half-empty mug of tea sat waiting, steam long gone, the surface still and quiet

"Alright, fine. I'm worried," Kristian confessed, more to himself than to Ben, "Because if that light was something... more than a trick of the eye, then what does it mean for us? For Greta." A beat of silence passes. "Did you tell Maks?"

"No," said Ben and looked up. "Maybe it's not about what the light means but about what we do with what we've seen. If it's a warning, we need to listen."

Kristian nodded, feeling the weight of those words settle like a stone in his chest. He took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent of lavender from the sachet tucked in the back of the cupboard—a scent that had always reminded him of safer times. But the floral scent was gone, and now it smelled like lilies at a funeral.

"You're right," he said, voice steadier now. "We can't look away anymore, but I still need to talk to Maks. Before he finds *it*."

Outside, the wind did not only rustle through the trees. It was a wheezing that sounded far more like a name than a soft rustling within the four walls. Greta glanced up from her embroidery hoop, her eyes meeting Kristian's and briefly holding his gaze.

The younger girls, oblivious to the adult gravity surrounding them, continued their game, their laughter bubbling up like a fresh spring. Their innocence served as a reminder that the world could still be simple, that joy could coexist with uncertainty. It was a subtle, yet necessary, reassurance that even in the presence of mystery, ordinary moments held the power to anchor them.

Kristian took a sip of the tea; it was cold now, a bitter, viscous liquid that coated his tongue like oil.

"Tomorrow," he rasped, his voice sounding thin against the oppressive weight of the room. The tea didn't help. "We go to the church. We wait for the sun to die, and we pray—not for mercy, but for a way out. We'll

ask for guidance, but we keep our eyes open. Wide open."

He stared into the dark corner of the ceiling, where the shadows seemed to be thickening, dripping like tar. "We'll find Elias, we'll crawl into the rot of that attic, and we'll drag the truth of that light into the open. No matter what we find up there—no matter what it looks like or how it screams—we stay together."

He gripped the mug so tightly a hairline fracture spider-webbed across the porcelain. "Because the moment we're alone, we're dead."

A deep furrow creased onto Ben's forehead. "The beam worries you? The birds don't? That's all we can do, isn't it? Stay together, stay hopeful, and—" He leaned in, his breath smelling like rancid berries.

"Believe in the Lord," finished Kristian, though the words felt like a stone in his throat.

Ben let out a jagged, ugly laugh. "Like that helped us the last time. I know where you stand, but that won't solve things, not now."

Kristian swiveled his chair, the soft clink of his mug echoing in the dim room as he caught Greta's gaze locked onto the steaming cup before her. He ignored Ben, focusing solely on Greta. She was staring into her cup, her reflection distorted in the dark swirling liquid. "You've been silent all evening," he remarks.

Greta's brow furrowed for a moment before she raised her gaze, a glimmer of surprise reflected in the liquid. "I don't see Elias as the threat everyone paints him to be," she says, her voice steady. "Look at him—he's nothing more than a talker."

Kristian's hand lifts, a single trembling finger pointing to the window where the street is painted gold by the late afternoon sun. "Look at you, Greta," he whispered, a warning vibrating in the air. "Charm is just the skin the predator wears. It hides a dangerous current. Have you forgotten what it's done to your mother?"

Greta's chest rose, her breath caught in a tense rhythm. Around them, the clatter of plates failed to drown out his thoughts.

Greta sets her cup down, the hand-painted porcelain chattering against the saucer. “Mama made her own choices.” The edge of hurt sharpened her words. “She loved him, and she paid the price in bone marrow. I’m not naïve.”

Kristian leaned back, his eyes never leaving hers. “I’m not asking you to be hollow,” he says gently, his voice dropping to a hum. “I’m telling you that you need to look at the teeth behind that smile. Something is wearing a man’s face, Greta. And you’re inviting it to the table. You’re so—” He clenches his jaw before he can say the word. Naive.

Greta swallows, the tea cooling in her mouth as she processes his warning. The conversation, though brief, feels like the turning point—one where loyalty, love, and danger intersect. The room felt smaller now, the walls leaning in as if to overhear the moment her mind finally cracked.

Kristian saw her stance and saw how she picked at the hem of her black vest, its fabric now faintly singed at the edges. She lifted it to her nose, inhaling cautiously. There it was again: a chemical tang, sharp and synthetic, clinging to the fibers like an unshakable secret.

"I’ve been noticing it too," murmured Simon, twisting a pen between his fingers. "Like... something’s off about the smell. You all good?"

Kristian’s eyes flicked to Simon, who sat slouched in his chair, a too-casual picture of indifference; a single brown curl spiked his ear. “The smell?”

The others nodded vaguely, but Greta caught the way Kristian’s jaw tightened, his fingers drumming a rhythm on the table.

"I’m sure it’s the soap," said Kristian, voice light but firm, as if reciting a rehearsed line. He angled his body slightly toward Maks. "You did say you changed the formula, right?"

Maks smirked, leaning back with a shrug. "I’ve recently upgraded the ingredients. The smell's supposed to be bold now. You’re welcome."

The room stiffened. Beside Maks, Ben's knuckles whitened around his water bottle. His silence was louder than words—a low rumble of frustration that Kristian could practically feel, like the charged air before a storm. Kristian didn't miss it.

Maks's head jerked toward the hallway, his knuckles brushing the wall as if anchoring himself. "I—" He swallowed, his voice fraying. "I should talk to Maren. Maybe she's seen...smelled... this before."

Kristian's breath hitched. "Seen what?" His own head snapped around, eyes narrowing as if the walls might swallow the answer whole.

Maks hesitated, the faint click of settling pipes echoing through the house like bones shifting. "Whatever it is." He clawed at the air, as though erasing the word. "Old gas, maybe? Or the pipes. They're old."

A beat of silence stretched between them, punctuated by the distant whine of a draft—though no windows were open. Kristian's jaw tightened. The pipes had been renewed in April.

"It doesn't sound like pipes." His voice dropped, dry as dirt. "That thumping last night? The flickering lights? You heard it too."

Maks didn't answer. Maren wasn't here to take his side, to blindly believe that everything was fine. She'd left for the convenience store hours ago, and the farmhouse felt... thicker now, the air closing in on their skin like something was breathing in rhythm with the creaks.

Kristian took a step back. "If it's gas," he said slowly, "Why can't I light a match?"

Somewhere below them, in the boiler room, he guessed, a pipe groaned—a sound like a throat clearing—but Kristian's gaze snapped to Ben, sharp and warning, and for a heartbeat, the two locked eyes. Ben looked away first, muttering about needing air, and escaped through the back door.

Greta dropped the hem of her vest, and Kristian unconsciously mirrored her movement, the uncomfortable truth settling in his gut: this wasn't an off-putting fragrance, not some stray scent from the market. But he couldn't say it. Speaking it made it true.

Kristian exhaled, running a hand through his hair. "Let's finish up here. It's not a big deal." But his eyes

betrayed him, scanning the group for cracks he wasn't sure were there yet. Maks's laughter rang too brightly as he joked about "perfume trials," but Kristian saw it, saw that Greta couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted.

Just a few steps to the right, Ben's muffled voice carried through the open door, arguing with someone unseen. The soap, the smell, the tension—it all felt like the first domino toppling in a chain none of them could yet see. And as the clock on the wall ticked forward.

Henrik stood paralyzed by the counter, silhouetted against the peeling, seafoam-green tiles, the brass pocket watch in his hand glinting like a misplaced prized possession. Its glass face was cracked from the center where the hands were frozen at 15:33—a time neither of them could explain.

Kristian slammed the door shut behind him with a sharp kick. The sound didn't disappear; it trapped them inside, echoing back like a scream in a well.

"What's going on, Henrik?" Kristian's voice was steady, but the tremor in Henrik's gaze told him he was treading thin ice.

Henrik didn't answer right away. He twisted the watch between his fingers, the gears silent. "It stopped," he said finally, too quietly. "Midnight. Or what felt like midnight." He rubbed the back of his neck, a nervous tic. "But the storm—"

"—was only the beginning," Kristian interrupted, stepping closer. The air thickened like a cold grip against his nape.

Henrik's pupils had dilated, swallowing the light from the flickering bulb above.

"You've seen it, haven't you?" Kristian's throat felt like it was being harrowed from the inside. "At the cathedral."

Henrik nodded, his brows furrowing. "I tried to blame it on the storm. The way every clock in the nave died at once—suddenly, without... any explanation. I told myself it was a power surge. But..." He glanced at the watch, then at Kristian, as if measuring his next words. "When I saw your watch stop too, I knew." His voice

dropped.

Kristian's pulse thrummed in his ears. The cathedral had been empty that night, save for the two of them. The way the stained glass had shattered in the wind, casting fractured shards along the pews, and the way their shadows had... quivered, as if alive. He'd dismissed it, but now the memory clawed at him.

Henrik took a step back, pressing against the tiles. "It's not the watches," he murmured. "The shutters are jamming. The radio only spits out a sound like someone choking on hair. Even the fire in the hearth—it went out and wouldn't relight. Not a spark." His breath fogged in the air.

Kristian opened his mouth to reply, but the only sound was the distant groan of wind through the oaks. "Like the heat is being sucked out of here."

Outside, the storm had passed, leaving the world eerily still except for the mass of dead birds, which still lay scattered all over the ground. And in that silence, the watch in Henrik's hand began to tick, soft and deliberate—one second, before falling silent again.

Click.

"It moved...," Henrik's voice cracked, barely clawing its way out of his throat.

Kristian didn't respond. His gaze was anchored to the threshold where a greasy ripple slithered across the floorboards. A silhouette of someone who wasn't there. It didn't mimic the light. It swallowed it.

"The birds?" Kristian's voice was thin, his eyes dropping to the threshold. A heap of feather-soaked birds sat piled against the door, a black mass of meat just a breath away from his boots.

Henrik shook his head, the sound a dry rustle. "My watch... it stopped at exactly twelve."

"See?" Kristian forced a laugh, the words tasting like dirt. "It's... it's counting the seconds." He tried to convince himself, his own heart thudding in his ears, that the ticking was still there.

Kristian stared at the lifeless sparrow at his feet. Its tiny chest, once a rhythm of fragile beats, was frozen mid-heave. It lay still, feathers matted with something that looked uncannily like frost. The forest around him had fallen eerily silent—no rustle of leaves, no distant call of birds. Only the low, insistent hum of

winter, creeping in like a thief.

"They shouldn't die right now," Kristian muttered, crouching. The sparrow's beady eye reflected the sickly silver of the moon, which hung too low, too large. "It's not their season."

His voice cracked. Beside him, Henrik knelt, his breath settling into a scornful scoff. "Kristian... its beak—it's blue." He brushed a glove-covered hand over the bird's head, and the color deepened, like ink seeping through skin.

Kristian recoiled. "Dark season hasn't even begun. They're supposed to migrate north by now, not... not freeze like this."

Henrik stood abruptly. "Maybe it was sick?"

"Sick?" Kristian's laugh was sharp and bitter. He gestured to the trees around them, their branches clawing at the sky. "This isn't a sickness. It's a sign."

His gaze dropped to the bird again. "Remember what happened in '17, when the frosts came early? The fox? The way its paws..."

Henrik shifted, his boots digging into the ground beneath. "You think this is the same?"

"Something's changing the rules—your watch, the seasons, the birds. It's clear," he hissed. "And I don't think we're next on the list. I think we're already on it."

A sudden, guttural cry split the air—a sound that didn't belong to any living creature. Like a lung being torn in half.

Kristian froze. The sparrow's body began to rattle, its beak twitching as if trying to chew through its own flesh.

But Kristian couldn't move. His eyes locked on the bird's neck, which twisted impossibly, violently, as frost crept up its feathers like a fungus.

"Kristian!" Henrik screamed, yanking his arm.

He stumbled back, his heart pounding, as the sparrow let out a sound like a knife being dragged across bone.

Its eyes snapped open—glowing now, blue and hungry.

Kristian's foot lashed out. But the bird took flight. He chased it through the grey fog, boots slipping in the mud. He kicked, his heavy sole meeting the wing and the hollow bone.

The bird screeched before collapsing at his feet, twitching in pain.

"Stay dead," Kristian panted, his heel coming down with a sickening crunch. The sparrow's body shuddered, but instead of blood, its feathers melted like ink in a basin. Beneath the sludge, a miniature human torso pushed through its skin, the tiny flesh sizzling as it touched the rain. A face formed, pale and familiar.

"You're the thing that died," the sparrow hissed, its mouth stretching until the corners tore toward its ears. "And you dragged me down with you."

The figure dissolved into a puddle of bile, leaving the sparrow's hollow carcass, now still. The rain began to fall warmer now, almost like tears. Kristian did not feel the agony at first—not until the wet pop of bone singulated the wings tearing out from his own shoulder blades, the feathers piercing his ribs from the inside out.

Henrik stepped forward behind him, kicking the lifeless bird into the muck. "There's your answer."

Slowly Henrik's hand slipped into the torn cuff of his coat, fingers brushing the worn cord of a rosary. The beads—each a faded amber—clinked together with a soft chime as he drew them out, one by one, and let them tumble into his palm.

In a gesture that was both prayer and punishment, he wound the chain tightly around his clenched fist, the metal biting into his skin as Kristian stood—alone, haunted.

"Come now," Henrik's voice drifted back. "Maks told me what Maren said."

"And that is?" Kristian's throat felt as though it were broken glass.

"That we should have seen this coming," said Henrik, his voice steady as he looked at Kristian. "Long ago. Before the first bird fell."

Kristian knew he was right. They knew something was coming. They'd always known that.

Maybe he didn't want to have it coming that soon. He hoped that the end would have a face he recognized; instead, it was a stranger. And maybe, Kristian wished that he knew its name. But now that he dragged his feet over the asphalt, his thoughts were no longer his own, the hopes wouldn't settle into his mind, and all that remained was a loud, gawking silence—thousands of birds hammering against his skull from within.

The stone arches of the stave church loomed ahead like a ribcage against the bruised evening sky, each dragon head catching the last sliver of light and turning it into a cold, watching eye. Kristian's boots echoed on the cobblestones.

He paused at the great wooden doors, their iron hinges sighing as if exhausted from the years of holding back whatever lay beyond, and pushed them open with reluctance, and only then did the noise stop.

Inside, the cathedral was a cave of shadows, the incense-laden air heavy with the scent of old wood and forgotten prayers. Kristian stumbled to the front pew, the white wood cold beneath his knees, and lowered himself to the floor.

Fingers trembling from the cold that rushed through the antique entrance door, the smell of rust hitting his nose as he clasped his hands together and whispered, "Lord, forgive us..." His voice was a whisper into nothing, lacking warmth. "If there is anything left of us worth saving."

A shiver rippled through the nave, and for a heartbeat the darkness felt alive, pressing against his temples like a cold hand. Then the memory surged forward, a flash of the previous year's cathedral—St. Harald—where the walls had not only held prayers but also the raw, unfiltered terror of human screams.

He could still hear them.

"Help... please—" a woman's voice cracked, raw and desperate, tangled with the guttural howl of something unseen. The echo ricocheted off the stained glass, painting the floor with fractured colors of blood and grief.

Kristian's stomach churned, the familiar sound reverberating in his bones. He tried to picture Lis's face—a bright, sarcastic smile that could slice through any gloom. If she were still alive, she would have been

shouting something like, “Well, that’s one way to make an entrance!” from somewhere behind the altar, her voice laced with that unmistakable, biting humor that turned even the darkest moments into something absurdly human. She had always found the right snark to shave the edge off fear.

But there was no snark today, only the hollow ache of absence.

A low creak sounded from the far wall, as though a massive stone had shifted. Kristian’s breath caught, and he turned his head toward the source. The candlelight flickered, casting a trembling silhouette of a figure that seemed to hover beyond the reach of the pews—a shape that was neither fully formed nor wholly empty.

“Who’s there?” Kristian whispered, his voice cracking like thin ice. The cathedral answered with a soft, almost amused sigh that seemed to come from the very stones themselves.

A faint voice, barely audible over the rustle of his own breathing, slipped through the gloom. “You’re late, Kristian. The prayers are getting cold.”

He froze, eyes darting to the altar where a single candle burned brighter than the rest, its flame dancing with an unnatural steadiness. The air grew colder, and the faint smell of wet earth sprang from the floorboards, as if the cathedral’s foundations were drinking in the night.

“Lis?” His murmur was half hoping, half fearing.

A ripple of sound, like a dry leaf skittering across stone, answered, “You always were the serious one. Maybe now the Lord will have something to forgive.”

Kristian scoffed, feeling the weight of the unseen eyes upon him. She wasn’t there. Lis was dead. He bowed his head again, more resolute this time, and whispered, “If we’re still worthy, let us find the courage to hear the silence and the strength to speak back.”

The church doors groaned as Kristian stepped into the night, their rusted hinges screaming like wounded things.

The air hung thick with the scent of damp stone and something heavier—metal. At the threshold, he paused, his fingers dipping into the holy water font. It wasn’t water. His skin prickled as he drew back, the liquid clinging to his palm in a glossy crimson.

Without a second thought, he dragged his hand across the back of his hand, scraping a jagged sigil into the skin. The symbol pulsed faintly, like a wound smoldering with fever, before the light died.

Kristian pocketed a vial from his coat—for later, he thought—and vanished into the pines.

He looked up, and the silence of the church grew teeth. It wasn't the peaceful quiet of a sanctuary, but the breathless, predatory hush of a tomb.

"Lis?" he called out.

The name felt like a sin on his tongue. He regretted it the moment the syllable left his lips—calling after a woman whose body had been committed to the black earth months ago. But the air in the nave had shifted. It was thick with the scent of her favorite pressed lilies, curdled now by that persistent, metallic rot.

He could have sworn he saw a movement near the altar—a flash of a hem, a tilt of a head.

"Lis, is that you?"

From the deepest shadow behind the pulpit, a sound emerged. It wasn't a voice, but the flesh-like sound, a wet *snick-pull* of a needle passing through heavy fabric.

Snick. Pull. Snick. Pull.

Then, a figure stepped into a sliver of moonlight filtering through a shattered saint’s eye. It was Lis, but she was draped in the same black vest Greta had worn, the edges glowing with a low, blue phosphorescence. Her skin was the color of wet parchment, and where her eyes should have been, there were only the fluttering wings of trapped sparrows, beating against the inside of her sockets.

"You called for the dead, Kristian," she whispered, her mouth not moving, the voice vibrating from somewhere deep within her chest. "But you forgot that we always answer."

As she stepped closer, the floorboards beneath her feet didn't creak

It wasn't real.

Kristian squeezed his eyes shut until his vision sparked with phantom light, a desperate attempt to deny the thing standing by the altar. His fingers scrambled for his prayer beads, winding the cord so tight the amber hissed against his skin. He reached his other hand out into the void, his palm flat and trembling, feeling for the cold iron of the door.

He began to turn, a blind man navigating a nightmare.

"Don't leave, Kristian," the voice vibrated, sounding like a thousand wings beating at once. "The stitching isn't finished."

His outstretched hand brushed against something. It wasn't the rough, honest grain of the wooden door. It was cold. It was wet. It felt like the matted, frost-covered feathers of a thousand dead sparrows, piled high and thick against the exit.

The metallic scent of rust exploded in his senses, so sharp he could taste the copper on his back teeth. He reached further, his breath coming in jagged, sobbing hitches, but his hand only sank deeper into the wall of carrion.

Then, a hand—small, delicate, and freezing—latched onto his wrist.

The grip wasn't human. It was the crushing, needle-like squeeze of a bird's talon.

"Open your eyes, Kristian," Lis whispered, her voice now coming from right beside his ear. "Look at what we've made for you."

The rosary in his other hand suddenly went warm. Then hot.

It wasn’t real. He tossed the rosary to the ground, then pushed open the heavy doors.

The church doors groaned as Kristian stumbled into the night, their rusted hinges screaming like wounded things. He paused at the threshold, his breath coming in ragged plumes. He looked down at his hand, the one he had dipped into the holy water font. It wasn't water. The liquid was thick, dark, and smelled of the same metallic rot that had infested Lis’s phantom eyes.

He didn’t wipe it off. Instead, a feverish impulse took hold of him—a memory not of scripture, but of the things whispered by the old men in the village when the harvests failed.

Using his thumbnail, he began to scrape. He dragged the jagged edge across the back of his hand, carving a sigil into the skin that he didn't even realize he knew. The symbol—a series of intersecting thorns—began to pulse with a low, sickly heat. It wasn't a prayer. It was a binding.

"If the Lord won't answer," he rasped, his voice breaking against the wall of trees, "then the soil will."

He didn't head back to the warmth of the farmhouse. He turned toward the orchard, toward the sagging silhouette of the broiler house that stood like a rotted tooth against the moon. He moved with a mechanical, heavy rhythm, his boots crushing the frost-matted grass.

The broiler house stretched beyond the orchard, its silhouette a pointed tooth against the moonlit sky. Moss clung to the wooden walls like veins, and as Kristian pushed through the sagging gate, his boots thudded against warped planks. Someone had carved symbols into the beams, deep and grotesque, their edges dark with age or oil. A pentagram, a serpent swallowing its tail, a circle of thorned runes—invocations, bindings, or warnings? He traced one with his fingertips, the grooves biting into his skin

Inside, the chickens huddled in the rafters, their feathers dull as tallow. Kristian fed them first—a deception, a peaceful moment. He scattered cracked corn from a plastic bucket, watching as beaks pecked hungrily.

Then he fetched the knife from his duffel bag.

It was old, its blade etched with the same sigils as the walls, and when he pressed the edge to the first bird’s throat, it didn’t squawk. Only gasped, once, like a person drowning. Five hearts later, the floorboards were slick, the air heavy with the copper tang of blood and feathers.

He worked quickly and methodically, as though following a script he couldn’t remember writing. The broiler house had always felt… wrong to him, even as a boy, when he’d crept here to carve his name alongside

the older symbols.

The sigil on his palm had faded, but the itch beneath his skin remained. Kristian waited in the pines as the sun rose, the first light painting the trees in silver. Gold wouldn't come. Not for a long time.

Something else came instead. A cry. Pierced right from the farmhouse. The doors shoved open. The painting splintered under the power of it.

His thoughts were a tangled spiral of panic and disbelief when he saw Ada hunched over a table in the corner, a lone figure illuminated by the lone bulb above her.

"What are you drawing?" He asked, trying to keep his voice steady. The question barely left his lips before Ada's eyes flicked up, a sliver of amber in the low light, then slid back to the paper without a word.

He knelt beside the table, the surface littered with charcoal shavings and splatters of dark ink. The sketch began to resolve under the dim light: a figure cloaked in gnarled branches, its limbs twisted like saplings forced into impossible angles. Beside the creature stood a man—skin pale as moonlight, eyes empty, posture rigid, dressed in a grey overall, his hands covered in branches. Kristian's heart hammered against his ribs.

"Where... where did you see him?"

"When the roots drink, the sky forgets its name." She pressed her finger to her lips. "But don't tell."

"Ada, what... what does that mean?" Kristian's voice cracked, his eyes darting to the empty space where his presence should have been. "Did you see him? Did you see what happened to him?"

Ada's silence deepened, then she tapped the paper lightly with the tip of her charcoal, as if tracing an invisible line from the drawing to her own chest. "He stepped across," she finally murmured, her tone low.

Her face changed suddenly, her eyes sunken. "Can we go to bed? I'm tired."

The truth he had buried under layers of prayer and denial finally clawed its way into the light. The pattern in the shadows, the geometry of the fallen birds, the frozen time—it was all a signature.

Cthaoc had returned. The name felt like a mouthful of grave dirt. It wasn't just an omen anymore; it was a certainty, a cold god reclaiming its temple.

The air in the room grew heavy, smelling of stagnant water and ancient, unwashed hair. Kristian turned to the figure standing in the periphery of the candlelight. He didn't look at her face—he couldn't bear to see if the pupils had already begun to leak that oily white paint.

"It's time," he rasped, his voice sounding like two stones grinding together.

He reached out and took Ada's hand. Her skin was unnaturally smooth, lacking the warmth of a living pulse, and as his fingers closed around hers, he felt the delicate click-clack of bones that seemed to be rearranging themselves beneath her flesh.

Together, they walked toward her bedroom. The hallway seemed to stretch, the floorboards groaning in a low, rhythmic moan that sounded like a welcome.

He pushed open the door to the shared bedroom, the hallway light flickering on and off as if it were trying to decide whether to stay awake. Ada toddled behind him, eyes sunken from the tiredness, her tiny hand clutching the frayed strap of her nighttime bear.

He tucked her in, tucking the thin blanket around her as carefully as he could, making sure the corners were smooth and the seams tight.

"Sleep well, Ada," he whispered, though his voice sounded hoarse in the room, his eyes flickering to the others—sleeping soundly—like nothing bad could ever happen.

The little girl's eyes were already drooping, the violet hue of her night-light casting a soft halo over her face.

He turned away, swallowed a breath, and closed the door with a soft click that seemed louder than it should have been.

Back in his own room, a faint, wavering sound slipped through the cracks between the walls—a music box. Not the sweet, nostalgic lullaby that Ada loved, but a cracked, off-key rendition of "Tiptoe through the Tulips" that seemed to crawl out from some long-forgotten attic.

The melody trembled, each note dragging its tail like a moth hovering over a flame, and the sound grew louder as if someone had wound the mechanism with a rusted key. Kristian's heart thudded against his ribs.

He stared at the corner of his room where the old antique music box—an heirloom passed down through generations—sat on a dust-covered shelf, its brass lid closed and its handle untouched for years.

He wanted to ignore it, to pretend the music was nothing more than the house settling, but the notes kept spiraling, each one a little sharper, a little more insistent.

Sleep arrived in a thick, cloying fog. Kristian sank into his mattress, the music box still playing, but now the notes seemed to melt into the darkness, pulling the edges of his vision inward. He fell into a restless sleep, his dreams tangled in a web of cracked lullabies and shadowed corridors.

When he awoke, the sunlight filtered through the cracked curtains.

Kristian stared at the cracked music box that had once coaxed his grandmother's kitchen into a careless waltz of "Tip-toe Through the Tulips." Now its tiny ballerina lay frozen, her porcelain foot perpetually raised, the melody looping into an endless "tip-toe... tip-toe...," each repetition a needle pricking his nerves.

He could feel the box's cracked lid vibrating, as if trying to scream for release, while the air grew colder, the attic lights flickering in sympathy.

In a burst of frustrated fury, Kristian lunged, his palm slamming the porcelain shell against the plaster. The impact sent a splinter of wood flying, and with a final, mournful crack, the music sputtered and died.

He slipped back into the living room, the low hum of the old refrigerator the only sound that managed to pierce the stale air. The dim light cast long shadows across the faded rug, turning every chair leg into a skeletal finger reaching for his throat. Greta was still hunched over the kitchen table, her hands trembling around a half-filled cup of tea.

"Greta," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper that seemed to echo off the cracked plaster, "When was the last time you talked to Cthaoc?"

She stared at the chipped mug, her eyes flickering between the porcelain and the darkened window that looked out onto the yard.

"Before the accident," she whispered, the words slipping away like a dying draft. "But I think I saw

him...recently."

"How recent?" Kristian felt his heart pound against his ribs. He walked over to her, the creak of the wooden floorboards sounding like a warning bell.

Her jaw snapped shut. "Very."

He walked over to the large, grime-streaked window and pulled aside the thin veil of curtains. The world beyond was a blanket of night, the moon a thin crescent barely illuminating the garden.

The yard, once a place of childhood games and laughter, now lay in shadow, the trees standing as black silhouettes against a sky that seemed to swallow light.

For a moment, nothing moved. The wind whispered through the leaves, a sigh that sounded almost human. Then, from behind the gnarled trunk of an old oak, a shape emerged—half hidden, half revealed. It was unnaturally still, a dark mass that seemed to absorb the moonlight rather than reflect it. Kristian's breath caught in his throat as he tried to focus on the figure, his eyes straining to make sense of the night's illusion.

There, perched like a predator in the gloom, was Elias, now reduced to a ghost that clung to the bark of the tree. His back was turned, his head owl-turned at impossible angles, but Kristian could see the faint outline of a single, blonde curl that caught the faint gleam of the light. Yet it was the eyes that rooted him to the spot—two pins of piercing white that glowed like moons in the darkness, unblinking, unfeeling, and utterly alien.

He pressed his forehead against the cold glass, the chill seeping through his skin, and felt as if the window were a barrier.

Greta's voice, barely audible, broke through the night's silence. "Why?" she whispered, her tone silent. "Why did you ask me that?"

Kristian's head jerks back with a dry clack, as though his neck might snap. "For nothing important," he mutters, though the words feel like a lie even to him.

His voice dissolves into the silence thick as fog in the room, where shadows pool in the corners.

The window calls to him, and he turns, shoulders hunched. Outside, the world is a barren void. No wind, no trees, no distant echoes. Nothing but an endless stretch of blackness, as if the glass had swallowed the night whole.

His own face stares back, pale and fractured in the pane. He blinks. The reflection doesn't.

Its eyes—wide, unblinking—seem to drill through him, mimicking the tilt of his head, but a second late, like a recording played out of sync. Kristian's breath fogs the glass, smudging the stranger's features, but when he wipes it away, the face is still there. Smiling now.

A floorboard creaks. High above. Behind him.

He freezes. His eyes peel back toward the glass; the reflection hasn't moved. It never does. Not really. It watches. Kristian doesn't check the door when he eventually looks away. Doesn't dare check the lock. He can feel it all the same—those eyes, those wrong eyes, still following. Waiting for him to look back.

Ring Around the Rosie

Chapter 7: Greta

The knee that bends never learns to climb and the hand that prays forgets how to build. — Lukas 12:1

Greta had always prided herself on being a sound sleeper—until the dreams began. At first, they were fragments: like whispers in the dark, the feeling of someone standing at the foot of her bed, and blurred shapes that dissolved when she pried open her eyes. Then the visions got sharp. They clutched around her like cold smoke in a graveyard.

She'd see her childhood home, which had long been swallowed by flames, standing whole again, its windows glowing with a sickly yellow light. Inside, shadows moved behind cracked glass, figures with long, stalky limbs pacing the halls, calling her name in voices too... teethy to be human.

Worse still was the feeling—each dream deepening it—that she was being pulled, not watched. Something was reaching for her through the veil of sleep, its fingers brushing the edge of her consciousness, tugging her toward a threshold she wasn't certain she could cross and return from.

The nightmares weren't confined to sleep anymore. She'd catch movement in her peripheral vision—a shadow slipping behind a door, a flash of pale skin in the mirror—but when she turned, there was nothing. Her reflection sometimes lingered a second too long after she looked away. The air in her bedroom grew thick and cold, breathing like a living thing, and no matter how high she cranked the heat, her fingers stayed numb.

One night Greta woke not to darkness, but to silence so heavy, it felt violent. The hum of the refrigerator downstairs had stopped. The rustle of trees outside had vanished. Even her own breath seemed swallowed by the stillness. Her body was skeletal, her limbs buried under the weight of hands.

She tried to scream, but her throat churned shut.

Then, from the hallway, a sound slithered up the hallway: slow, creeping footsteps. Not the creaks of an old house settling, but measured steps, each one echoing like a heartbeat against the floorboards.

And then—she wasn't in bed anymore.

She stood in the corridor, barefoot on the splintering wood, her nightgown clinging to her like a second skin, dripping with water. She didn't remember getting up, didn't remember opening the door, but here she was, drawn forward by strings. The hallway stretched longer than it should have, the walls narrowing, the ceiling lowering like her throat that had begun to close. Shadows circled in the corners, shifting when she wasn't looking at them.

At the end of the hall, a figure waited.

Tall, too tall, his silhouette stood against the faint glow seeping from beneath the bathroom door. His posture was wrong—the angle of his neck, the way his arms hung, fingers grazing his thighs like they were

too long for his body, his eyes a single circle of white, too small to be an iris, too bright to be human. Greta wanted to run, to wake herself up from this waking dream, but her legs wouldn't obey. She could only stare. Then he turned.

His face wasn't a face—it was an illusion of one, a smudge of features carved into something pale and waxy. But his eyes—pure white, strange, yet familiar—locked onto hers, and in them, she saw not hatred, but wariness. A mirror of her own fear.

"Greta," he said, and his voice was the creak of old wood, the rustle of dried leaves. It was also terrifyingly gentle. It rumbled, too low, like it wished to shake the floorboards

She tried to speak, but her voice cracked into silence. He stepped forward, and the world tilted. The walls pulsed. The air tasted metallic, like blood on the tongue.

"I've been waiting." His mouth opened wider, impossibly wide. "You've been dreaming of me. But it wasn't a dream..."

She shook her head, but memories ignited behind her eyes. Images not from her dreams, but earlier. Much earlier.

A house by the lake. Two children playing in the reeds. A hand slipping, a splash, a scream swallowed by water. Her, screaming. And him—Elias—dragging her to shore. Then falling in himself. Vanishing beneath the black surface.

But that was wrong. Elias wasn't there. Elias wasn't there. It was Kristian who dragged her from the lake. It was Kristian....wasn't it?

Greta stumbled back, but the hallway was gone. Now they stood in the reeds, the lake lapping at their feet, the moon a ghastly smear in the sky. Elias reached for her, his fingers cold as stone. His voice is so soft. Too soft.

Elias's concerned voice pierced the uneasy quiet, drawing her back to the present. "Are you ok, Polly?" he repeated, his brow furrowed with worry.

Greta swallowed hard, her throat tight. She couldn't bring herself to respond, not with the images from her nightmare still fresh and vivid in her mind.

Elias rose to his feet and knelt beside her, his gaze searching her pale face. "You look... like you've seen a ghost," he murmured, his voice heavy with empathy.

In a strange, unsettling gesture, he plucked a sunflower from the ground and tucked it behind Greta's ear. The delicate petals felt cold and humid against her skin, like a piece of ice pressed against her warm flesh.

Greta's eyes widened with a chill of horror as the scene replayed in her mind like a film. She stood by the lake, barefoot, in her night robe, shivering beneath the frigid grass. The darkness seemed to press in, suffocating her.

"What... what am I doing here?" Her voice trembled as she turned to Elias, his pale face illuminated by the moon—moths huddling around him.

He shook his head, his expression sympathetic yet distant.

"You wandered off," he said simply, nodding towards the house in the distance. "I was out for a smoke and saw you standing here. You could catch a cold, so I thought I'd come check on you."

But Greta's thoughts were consumed by the memory that haunted her. A year ago. The wrong season. Lis, standing in the exact same spot, her dress now drenched, her auburn hair clinging to her pale face. Those eyes, once bright and full of life, are now vacant and glassy. That gaping mouth, struggling to draw in air as she choked on the unforgiving lake.

A shudder washed over Greta as the vision faded. She took an involuntary step back, her toes curling in the cold, damp grass.

Ben came running out of the house, his face twisted in a snarl. "If you continue to entice people like this, I'll show you—" he growled, his threat hanging in the air until his eyes dropped onto Elias.

“Can’t you see she isn’t ok?” Elias’s voice was low, his hand hovering above Greta’s shoulder like a warning bell. His body seemed to stiffen.

Ben's scoff was a dry rasp, a sound that scraped against the silence like gravel. "Clearly," he drawled, his gaze flicking to Greta with something unreadable. Pity? Contempt? Before returning to Elias. "But you have no idea."

The words hung, dripping with implication, as he took a slow step forward. The icy grass creaked beneath him, like a sickening echo in the suffocating quiet.

Elias didn't flinch, but his knuckles whitened. "No," he admitted, voice steady, "but shouting at her won't do any good, either."

Greta didn't move. Her face was pale, her lips parting as if to speak, then closing again. She looked smaller between them, a delicate thing caught in the space between two opposing storms. But she wasn't delicate.

Ben's laughter came then, quiet and low, like a lid closing. "You think you know her?" he murmured, taking another step, forcing Elias to retreat. "You see what you want to see."

Greta's breath came faster and shallow, as if the air had turned to glass.

Elias's jaw clenched. "Leave her alone," he said, the command softer now but weighted with something darker—finality.

Ben's smile widened, slow and feral. "You don't get to decide that."

Elias lifted a single, steady finger and pressed it hard against Ben's chest, the contact a sharp, icy reminder that he was not alone.

"Back. Off." Elias said, his voice low and steady, each word like a knife.

Ben's grin was crooked, a thin, unsettling smile that seemed to feed on the darkness itself. He chuckled, then glanced over his shoulder at Greta, who was watching from the far end of the meadow, now hidden in the shade of a broken tree trunk.

The light caught the glint of a silver chain around her neck, but her eyes never left the scene. When Ben turned back to Elias, his tone shifted, low and almost conspiratorial.

"You have no idea what you're doing," he insisted, the words slithering out from beneath his breath. "You

have no idea who you're dealing with."

Elias's eyes narrowed. "Better than you think," he replied, the edge in his voice now unmistakable. He nodded once. "Go," he instructed, and the word hung in the air like a promise and a threat fused into one.

Greta watches Ben disappear down the cobbled path, his silhouette swallowed by the bruised twilight. Her jaw locks tight, a familiar ache spreading along her temples as her fingers drift to her wrist—rubbing the bare patch of skin where a bracelet once rested, the golden bracelet that she never took off. That she'd found lying on the floor one day, sitting in the beam of the sun. It's gone now. He took it. Or maybe she let it slip off. She can't remember; all she knows is it was there a week ago. Only the hollow spot remains, a ghost-weight that tingles when the night wind bites. She'd tried to replace it with a beaded bracelet. But nothing felt quite right.

Elias steps beside her, quiet for once, his voice too soft when he finally speaks. "You're better than me; I'd have punched him," he says, almost reverent. "You shouldn't have to put up with people like him."

She turns to him, eyes dark and depthless. "Don't do that," she murmurs. "Don't elevate me. Complimenting people like that—it's a sin."

Elias shoves his hands into his coat pockets, staring at the empty yard where Ben had stormed off, kicking stones like they'd wronged him personally. "Is he always like that?" he asks. "All heat and no warning?"

Greta doesn't answer right away. Instead, she walks toward the patio, the wooden steps creaking under her like old bones. She leans against the railing, palms flat against the cold, splintered wood. Elias follows, always follows.

"It's not about being heated," she says at last, voice barely above the rustle of dead leaves. "It's about control. Ben needs to believe he's... better. That if he rages hard enough, everything will change. But nothing ever does." She lifts her wrist again and stares at the pale circle on her skin. "He took it because he thought it gave him power. Like holding onto metal means he held onto me." A smile touches her lips. "Funny thing is, I let him. Because sometimes it's easier to pretend you're wanted than to admit you're not wanted at all."

It's clear that Elias doesn't know what to say. He stands beside her in silence, two figures against the dying light.

"You're not ruin," Elias whispers at last.

Greta doesn't look at him. "Aren't I?"

Elias doesn't flinch. His head tilts, a wolf studying a rabbit. "You're not bad," he says, slow, almost carefully.

Her brow furrows. "Why not?" She asks, her words like bullets. "You don't know me."

Elias pauses, one that Greta thinks is too long. "From what I've seen, he's the asshole. Not you. You're too..."

The sentence trails off, a noose left dangling.

"Weak?" Greta's breath catches. She leans forward, as if leaning could make the truth stick.

"Polite," Elias says at last. His smile is a blade sheathed in velvet. "Like you're afraid of upsetting him. You shouldn't be."

The patio contracts. Somewhere beyond the walls, a pipe groans. Greta's thumb brushes the inside of her wrist—a habit she's had since she was twelve, since the first time she learned how small she could make herself.

But Elias's gaze doesn't waver. He's waiting. Not for an answer, but for a crack. A crack in her shell, and she wouldn't give him that satisfaction. The candle sputters, and for a moment, his face is swallowed by shadow. When the light returns, he's softer, almost kind. "You don't have to be polite to monsters," he says. It sounds like advice. It sounds like a dare.

She wants to believe him. But Elias's kindness smells like rot—sweet, insistent, and patient. He's right about one thing: the other man, the one who left bruises like inkblots on her skin, was the asshole.

"You're safer now," he says, and maybe he means it. Maybe he means the opposite. Maybe he is the one person that doesn't want to hurt her, that doesn't want to own her. And a part of Greta wants to believe that. But another one buries her in doubts. Because maybe, she is wrong again.

The lamp on the post dies. The moth goes with it.

In the sudden dark, Greta hesitates. Then she asks, quiet but steady, “What if I don’t want to be safe?”

Elias laughs. It’s warm. It’s wrong.

He stood a few paces behind her, hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket, breath fogging in the chill.

“You want my coat?” he asked without sparing her a glance.

Greta didn’t look at him. Her eyes were already fixed beyond the garden’s overgrown hedges, past the skeletal remains of rose bushes, toward the tree line. “No,” she said simply. “I’m warm.”

She tilted her head slightly, a small, mechanical gesture, and Elias followed the direction of her gaze. There, at the far edge of the garden, stood a deer. Its coat was dark, nearly black in the dim light, too dark for any natural creature. Its eyes caught the moonlight like shards of polished glass, reflecting nothing. It didn’t move. Didn’t breathe—or if it did, the motion was too subtle to see.

They watched it. Or maybe it watched them.

Elias shifted his weight, uneasy. “It’s been there awhile,” he murmured. “Didn’t think deer came this close to people.”

“What?”

"Hurt animals approach people in their final moments. Because if they're that badly injured, death doesn’t matter anymore.”

Greta didn’t answer. Her fingers curled into the edges of the blanket, gripping it as if it were the only thing anchoring her to the chair, to the ground, to the world. A breeze stirred, rustling the dead leaves across the path, but the deer didn’t flinch. Not even when a dried branch cracked underfoot—though neither of them had moved.

Then, faintly, from the woods beyond, a sound rumbled. A low, guttural clicking, like bones tapping together. The deer’s ears twitched. Greta exhaled—slowly, quietly—and smiled, but before she could turn her gaze toward the noise, Elias appeared in the doorway, his silhouette fraying at the edges. “Your coat,” he said, his voice threading through the cold. A question, but it landed like a command.

Greta didn't look up. Her fingers curled into the wool, knuckles pale.

"I'm warm," she murmured, the words too smooth, as if rehearsed. The blanket wrapped around her, a cocoon.

Elias frowned. Her cheeks glowed, unnaturally flush, while frost nipped at the porch steps. He wanted to ask more, but the way she sat—perfectly still, eyes glistening in the dim light—made his throat tighten. She didn't move. Didn't breathe.

All her eyes did was to fix onto something beyond Elias, toward a motionless deer standing at the edge of the tangled hedges. Its ears twitched, but it didn't flee.

Elias followed her gaze and whispered, "Want to feed it?"

She didn't answer right away. Then, beneath the rustle of leaves, she heard footsteps—slow, set with precaution.

Ben emerged from the orchard, a rifle slung carelessly over one shoulder, his eyes scanning the tree line like a hunter who never stopped hunting.

Greta's fingers curled into her palms. "No," she said flatly. "Not with him out there."

Elias studied her, the unease in her voice coiling between them like smoke.

She broke the silence first. "My sister," she began, voice hollow, "she's dead."

The words landed like stones. Elias murmured an apology, but Greta only smiled—a thin, fragile thing that didn't touch her eyes. It never did when she spoke about Lis.

"She's lucky," she said. "Met the Lord early, but Ben misses her."

Confused, Elias frowned. "But... isn't Ben your husband?"

Greta turned to him then, her neck cracking faintly as she snapped her head around. Bangs shifted, revealing the mark etched into her pale forehead: a blackened pentagram, its lines sharp and uneven, as though carved and stained into her skin.

He reached out without thinking, fingertips brushing the symbol. "What... what happened?" he asked, voice

barely above a breath. “Did he do that?”

“No. My father,” she said simply. No flinch. No tears. Only the quiet certainty of someone who had long ago accepted that pain.

The wind was still then. The deer was gone. Ben’s boots crunched over dry earth, moving closer, but Greta didn’t look back.

“He lives in the house,” she murmured. “But I want Ben under the willows.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, thick with something ancient and unspeakable. “With her.”

She had been walking the narrow, moon-stricken path that wound around the stream for weeks, the sort of solitary trek that made the world feel both infinitely large and suffocatingly close. The night was a thick blanket of fog, the trees hunched over the trail like watchful branches, and the air smelled of damp pine and something metallic, as if the lake itself were exhaling a faint, iron-tinged sigh, maybe vomiting up its victims.

She hadn't expected any sound but the soft crunch of her own boots on the loam, yet a sudden, unmistakable chorus of chirps tore through the stillness, sharp, reverberating from the water’s edge.

Frogs, she thought, their tiny throats beating a rhythm across the lake. But it was too cold, the time when the amphibians of these woods were buried deep beneath the frozen mud, silent in their hibernation.

The thought of their voices at this hour spiked the back of her neck, a cold finger tapping an unseen pulse. Greta pivoted, breath fogging in the chill, eyes straining against the night’s bleakness. The lake lay before her, its surface mottled with ice.

Without warning the sky split open. A torrent of rain hammered down, a persistent impact that turned the path into a slurry of black mud. The water surged, relentless, as if the clouds themselves were trying to drown the world. The mud at the lake’s edge gushed away in sheets, exposing a scarred, raw shoreline that had been hidden for months.

From the newly unveiled swamp, hundreds of frogs emerged, their wet bodies slippery with rain and trembling on the uncovered soil.

They did not hop.

Their limbs spasmed, each ribcage heaving as though something invisible forced air into them. Their throats bulged, then collapsed, producing a sour noise that echoed among the depths of the lake.

She stood rooted, jaw clenched so hard she thought her teeth would give in and drop onto her tongue. The rain hammered louder, each drop striking the flesh. The frogs' convulsions grew faster, their bodies twisting against the slick, reflective water.

One by one, they leapt, not away but toward her, their eyes, glass-like, milky, and inconceivably empty, fixed upon her as if she were the source of the disturbance.

Greta tried to step back, but the frogs were already on her boots, their cold skin slipping into the gaps of her laces. She felt a sudden weight as they crawled up the sides of her trousers, their oily tongues touching her skin.

Then they found her hair, slipping like wet glass beads into the strands, tugging at the dark blond curls that fell around her face.

One landed on her cheek, its beady eyes reflecting nothing but bleakness. She could no longer hear.

She could no longer hear the distant rumble of traffic, the hum of the town's power lines, nor the faint croaking that had once seemed a backdrop to the storm. The world fell away, leaving only the sensation of wet bodies clinging to her and the feel of thousands of tiny, trembling hearts beating against her flesh.

The frogs pressed against her lips, some slipping into the corners of her mouth, their slick bodies sliding along her teeth as she inhaled, filling her throat with a cold, amphibian breath that tasted of mud and decay.

Panic surged through her, an instinct to peel herself away from the living mass that threatened to suffocate her.

She lunged forward, grabbing at her own arms, trying to pry the endless swarm from her skin. The frogs clung tighter, their muscular legs digging into her flesh as though they knew the only way out was through her. In her struggle, her foot slipped on the slick, algae-coated ground, and she fell backwards into the murky

lake that had formed in the low meadow.

The water was a cold, black blanket that swallowed the sound of her scream before it could leave her lips.

She thrashed, her arms flailing against the unseen currents, but the lake seemed to hold her in an embrace, each movement pulling her deeper into its abyssal hush. As she sank, a sudden, hard impact struck the back of her throat—a rotten, withered lily pad, its once-bright green now a bruised, blackened husk, tore itself off a submerged stalk and slammed into her mouth.

The pad was thick, its edges torn like the teeth of some ancient beast. It lodged against the roof of her mouth, the bitter scent of decay filling her nostrils. The frogs, startled by the sudden intrusion, leapt away in a shuffle, but their departure left a hollow echo in the water—a silence so complete it pressed against her eardrums, making the world feel as if it were being drained of sound.

Greta's lungs filled with the cold, silt-laden water, and she realized with a cold, numbing clarity that she could no longer hear her own breathing.

She clawed at the slick stone, fingers scraping against a carpet of black moss that pulsed faintly beneath her touch. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she tried to rise—once, twice—but the ground betrayed her, wet with something far worse than rain.

As she fell, a tendril—slimy, ropy, and veined with a sickly green glow—snaked from the water's edge and wrapped around her ankle like a lover's desperate grasp. She screamed, but the sound died in her throat as more strands emerged, writhing from the stagnant pool, coiling up her leg, pulling her toward the dark.

Panicked, she twisted, her body spinning as her eyes turned white, glowing with an unnatural light. From her palms burst a searing radiance, pure and sharp as a blade, cutting through the gloom.

The algae shrieked and recoiled, sizzling where the light touched it. But it didn't release her. No, it laughed, a sound bubbling up from beneath the muck.

The roots she'd thought were dead snapped firm, anchoring deeper into the rock, and more of the glowing tendrils rose, not from the water now, but from the moss, the soil, even the cracks in the stone beneath her

hands.

The water pressed against her throat like a thousand cold fingers, and as the pressure mounted, her irises melted into a milky white—an eerie pulse that flashed the moment her dormant powers awakened. She forced her gaze upward, only to see the world above blurred through trembling ripples. Yet, before the darkness could claim her, she began to scream, and the sky erupted in a searing, white blaze, as if the sun itself had been ripped from the heavens and hurled into the void.

From the depths, the algae lets out a guttural scream. Threads of particles coil and slither like snakes, coiling around Greta's limbs, then, with a reluctant hiss, they release her.

She bursts upward, lungs burning, bubbles exploding around her like fireflies. When she breaks the surface, gasping for air, her eyes shift back to their natural color, but all she hears is her own breath.

The water clung to Greta's skin like cold, clammy fingers as she stumbled onto the dock, her legs trembling. She didn't look back. She couldn't. The figure she'd seen—a silhouette melting into the trees, its legs wobbling as if running through syrup—had already vanished, leaving only the creak of bending pines. She got up and ran—ran until she reached the upper floor.

She hit the floorboards barefoot, her lungs raw and burning like she'd swallowed lye. She didn't slow down. She slammed into the bathroom and fell against the sink, heaving for air so hard it sounded like her chest was cracking open.

The bathroom was a tomb of tiled flesh, the air thick with the stench of forgotten things. She toweled herself dry, her breath fogging the mirror's glass. But when she leaned closer, the reflection that stared back had hair matted to a scalp that wasn't hers, eyes black as submerged stones. Her hands, trembling, gripped the edges of the sink—porcelain, it had to be porcelain—but the surface was warm, pulsing faintly, like a heart. Then it happened. The thing in the mirror moved first. A slow, wet smile split its face, lips peeling back to reveal rows of needle-teeth. Greta's own mouth stayed sealed, her body frozen as the reflection tilted its head,

tracing the shape of a knife across its throat. The sink cracked. A single drop of black liquid splattered onto Greta's wrist—and she screamed, her hands slamming onto the rim of the sink, the mirror shattering into pieces, each falling onto the wooden ground.

Her fist shattered the glass with a sound like breaking bones.

Again. And again. Blood bloomed through her fingers, warm and insistent, as the shards trembled, not from the impact, but from something behind them. A breath. A scrape of fingernails on glass.

Kristian found her there, hunched over the pulpy mess of her knuckles. He grabbed her wrist, his touch cold, and dragged her to the bed. His hands were steady as he bound her fingers with gauze, but his eyes didn't meet hers.

"It's glass," he murmured, voice too calm, as if reciting a prayer.

But the mirror's surface rippled behind him, and for a heartbeat, Greta saw two figures in the glare: herself, and a shadowed shape gnawing at the edges, its teeth glinting where Kristian's hands had been.

When he finished, he lingered too long, thumb tracing the bandage. "I told you we should have prayed at nightfall. Next time," he whispered, "Try the wall. Or me."

"Not going to happen," she says, and finally grins at him.

"I know." He brushed her fringe aside with a single finger, revealing the scar on her forehead.

"I thought we were holy," Greta whispered, the words cracking. "Papa said we were holy."

"Erik is dead, Greta." Kristian's voice was both a caress and a curse, the kind of lullaby that lulls you into surrender.

She turned back to Kristian, her gaze fierce, a storm of fury and grief crackling around her. "No. He is not," she spat, the words a blade. "But we are not holy. We are all violent beings. All sick."

Kristian's smile faded.

A chill slithered down the hallway. The fluorescent lights above flickered—once, twice—casting jagged

shadows across the cabinets. Then, silence. The hum of the vents died.

That's when he saw her.

Ingrid.

She drifted past the cracked doorway, her pale face half-lit, eyes hollow and distant, fixed on some unseen point beyond the walls.

Her hair clung to her cheeks like damp clothes. Kristian froze.

Greta opened her mouth to speak, to call out, but Kristian grabbed her arm—his touch ice-cold. "Don't," he breathed. "She doesn't like being noticed."

Too late.

Ingrid stopped. Her head turned slowly, like rusted metal grinding, until her gaze locked onto Kristian's. Her lips parted—not to speak, but to smile. The corners split, stretching impossibly wide into a jagged, lipless grin.

Kristian stumbled back, the pencil clattering to the floor. He didn't mean to move, didn't mean to react—but instinct took over. He kicked out blindly, knocking over a metal stand that held an old fire extinguisher. It collapsed, groaned, then crashed forward.

Ingrid turned— as the extinguisher slammed into the doorframe, tearing free from its bracket. It tumbled, spinning like a pendulum, and struck her square in the temple with a sickening crack.

She didn't cry out.

She didn't fall.

She simply stood there, one hand rising slowly to touch the weeping wound, her grin still frozen wide, eyes unblinking. Blood—thick and dark, almost black—trickled down her temple, dripping onto the wooden floor with a plop. When Ingrid toppled forward, she tripped over something, her shoe caught, and she fell.

Then she smiled wider.

"Oh God," Kristian choked, backing away. "I didn't—I didn't mean—"

Greta ran forward, pulling Ingrid's body onto her lap. Her fingers brushed hers, grabbing her hand. Now her dirt-caked nails were full of blood, ice cold to the touch.

"You saw me." she called out, her finger jabbed at Kristian. "Now I see you."

The lights went out. And in the suffocating dark, something brushed Greta's ankle. She reached down to touch it; it's a shoe. Her fingers move to the ankle that is above, the skin cold and stiff. And then something rings—a small bell.

Esja.

Then, an unseen force—a black, pulsing void—whispers through the hallway, its presence cold and gnawing. It coils around her feet, yanking her backward like a marionette with severed strings. Greta lunges forward, her heart a war drum in her chest, boots screeching against the tiles. The hallway stretches impossibly long, walls warping as if alive, the light bleeding out like a wound. She reaches the end—a hollow, pitch-black void where nothing exists, not even air. No Esja. No sound. Only a suffocating absence.

Who killed Cock Robin

Chapter 8: Elias

Let that inner truth be thy compass, steadfast as the North Star, that thou may walk the path of righteousness unshaken. — Lukas 10:20

Elias's vision came unbidden in a flash of something wrong, a distortion in the air that left his skin crawling. He stumbled backward, breath ragged, as if the room itself had recoiled from the intrusion. In an instant his eyelids slammed shut, as if a fist were clamped over his sockets, while a jagged spike of pain detonated behind his eyes—so acute it threatened to force his legs into the earth.

Rows upon rows of corndolls, their stalks bent like skeletal fingers, swaying under a blood-red sky. Above them, a swarm of sparrows thrashed erratically. And then—nothing. Pure tiny sparks of debris.

Elias's hands trembled as they slipped through the grime-slicked folds of his coat. His breath hitched, shallow and sharp, as though the air itself had thickened. He fumbled for the small, blister-wrapped bottle of anti-nightmare pills. The metal of his pocket latch bit into his fingertips.

He'd been taking them for years—little blue capsules that left a metallic tang on his tongue and numbed the edges of his sleep. Without them, the dreams came: a chorus of whispers in languages he almost understood, a door out of reach, a face in the mirror that wasn't his, always one step closer.

The pill would kick in soon. It had to. Because in the spaces between heartbeats, he could almost hear it again: the sound of the creaking basement door—and the blood, so much blood.

The stairs groaned beneath his hurried steps, now in slow motion, and his knuckles whitened around the banister.

Halfway up, the whispers began. They slithered through the shallow hallway, barely audible, yet heavy like a bolt—hushed names, contorted by the thick walls, or perhaps something else entirely.

The framework seemed to constrict, and a sudden wave of lightheadedness struck him, as though the very air

had thickened with poison. His fingers gripped the railing, nails biting into wood, but the whispers only grew fainter, dissolving into the void.

Elias's eyelids slammed shut, as if his fingers could squeeze the terror from his mind.

His molars ground together with a violent crack, wood splintering in his jaw as he bit down. Not on anything— air. pain. The ringing in his ears had started hours ago, a screeching feedback loop that made his skull feel like a pressure cooker on the verge of explosion. His eyes burned, not from tears, but from the sensation of invisible needles rotating inside his sockets, as though some nameless thing on the other side of his eyelids was trying to peel them out.

He didn't dare open them. Not yet.

The second floor in the house was a maze of shadows, the air thick with the scent of mildew and iron. Elias had come here to escape the noise—the voices in his head, the whispers in the walls.

But the floor had its own kind of noise, its own kind of hunger. He'd heard stories about this place, of course. How the children vanished in '25, leaving behind a trail of blood and a single, clawed footprint in the flour outside the house. But stories didn't prepare you for the feeling of something pressing against your nerves, like a hand trying to turn your spine inside-out.

His breath came in shallow gasps. The pain in his ears spiked, and for a moment, he heard them—a chorus of wet, gurgling whispers, their syllables slithering through his teeth. He gritted harder, willing the sound to stop, willing the eyes-screaming to fade. It always worked, eventually. The silence would return. The pressure would retreat.

This time, though, the darkness shifted.

A wet, scraping sound slithered down the walls. Elias froze. His eyelids trembled—don't look, don't look—but the needles in his eyes had turned to hands, tugging, pulling, inviting. Slowly, agonizingly, he forced one lid to rise.

The room wasn't the same.

The concrete walls had melted into a glossy, black barrier, veined with pulsing red lines. Something moved beneath the surface, too slow to be blood, too intentional to be a trick of the light. And then he saw them—glimmering shapes in the corners of the room, faceless figures with too many joints, their limbs dripping with something that shimmered like teeth.

Elias's jaw unhinged in a silent groan. The ringing returned, louder now, and the blackness breathed. He slammed his eyes shut again, but the images seared behind his lids. His teeth cracked. Blood flooded his mouth.

It wasn't the silence he feared. It was what waited on the other side of it. It wasn't a thought—more like an instinct, a whisper in the marrow—when his fingers, slick with sweat and something else, something viscous, reached out and plunged into the crumbling plaster.

It gave way too easily, like rotten flesh, and a sound followed: a wet, splintering crack, like the snapping of a spine wrapped in cloth. He didn't pull back. He pushed, deeper, feeling the gritty resistance, the give of something soft and packed behind the wall's decaying surface.

Then came the pop.

Not loud, but audible. The sound of a small, hard thing being crushed beneath relentless pressure. His fingers curled, clenching around the debris—and then around it. Whatever it was, it ruptured. A thick, dark fluid, almost black, oozed between his knuckles. It didn't smell of blood. It smelled like old copper and spoiled earth, like the breath of something buried.

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then—a pulse. A faint, rhythmic throb against his palm, as if the crushed thing still lived, still felt.

He tried to yank his hand free, but the wall held. The plaster tightened like hardened sinew, gripping his wrist like a cold fist. Panic flared, sharp and electric.

And then he saw them.

At the edge of the hole, where his fingers had torn the wall open, more shapes emerged. Not insects, not exactly. They were the size of ticks, yes—plump, dark, segmented—but their bodies glistened with a sickly iridescence, like oil on stagnant water. And their legs—too many legs—twitched, probing the air. Worst of all were the mouths. No, not mouths. Orifices, ringed with needle-thin spines, opening and closing.

One dropped onto the back of his trapped hand.

His breath caught, thick and sour in his throat. The thing crawled toward the crushed husk oozing between his fingers. It dipped its grotesque maw into the black fluid—feeding—and as it did, he felt a new sensation deep in his bones: a pull. Not physical. Something deeper. A drain.

Memories flickered—fragments of childhood, faces of people he'd loved—vanishing like smoke. His strength waned. His vision blurred at the edges, the room darkening as if shadows were pouring in from the walls themselves.

He realized, then, with chilling certainty: they weren't in the wall.

The wall was made of them.

Centuries old. Starving. And now, awakened by the warmth of his blood. The crushed one hadn't been an accident. It had been a signal.

More emerged, dozens, hundreds, swarming. They didn't bite. They attached. Climbing his arm, burrowing into the sleeve of his shirt, pressing their pulsing bodies against his skin.

He could still feel his heart beating as he flicked them off his skin, burying them again in the walls, where they could whisper again, breathe again.

The house breathed when he wasn't looking. That was the first thing Elias noticed—the way the shadows in the hall stretched too long after sunset, pooling beneath doorframes like still water, recoiling only when light touched them. Greta had always loved the dark, so he'd been told.

As kids, she'd hide under blankets with a flashlight, reading tales of forest spirits and old gods, her eyes wide with something between wonder and warning.

Now, standing before her bedroom door—unlocked, slightly ajar, as if inviting or expecting—Elias felt that old dread coil around his ribs. He stepped inside, and the air changed. It wasn't cold—it was consumed, the warmth siphoned, replaced with a damp, earthy scent like moss over stone.

The bed was made, but the quilt bore an impression, as if someone had lain there recently. Too recently. On her nightstand, a single object: a leather-bound book, old, its cover embossed with symbols that looked Nordic but weren't letters bent out of shape, like screams carved into hide.

Elias picked it up. The spine cracked like a knuckle. Her name was not on the cover. But he knew. This was hers. The weight of it in his hands felt unnatural, dense, as if it held something far heavier than paper. He flipped it open, the pages yellowed at the edges, thumbing past illustrations of horned figures lurking beneath bridges, hags with teeth like roots, and creatures with too many joints. Trolls.

Then he saw it.

Tucked between two pages near the back, a photograph, curled slightly at the corners. He pulled it free. On it, Greta stood beneath a gnarled birch tree, maybe 7 years old, barefoot, dressed in a white shirt that looked too large for her. Her hair was loose, tangled with twigs and what might have been ivy. She was smiling—but it wasn't her smile. It was stretched, ecstatic in a way that felt wrong, like joy carved into something not quite human. And beside her, a man.

But not a man.

That was Elias's first thought, second only to the narrowness on his face. The figure beside her stood a head taller, stooped yet powerful, its limbs too long, fingers curling like gnarled roots. His face—face?—was shadowed beneath a wide-brimmed hat, but in the photo, one eye caught the light. Not human. Black, reflective, like a pool. Around his neck hung a pendant: a twisted knot of bone, carved with the same symbols from the book's cover.

Scrawled on the back of the photo, in Greta's handwriting: "My Lamb. 6:16."

Elias' breath stuttered. That number. 6:16. He flipped back through the book, heart jackhammering against his sternum. There, near the final pages, was a passage written in dense, archaic script. Not Norwegian. Old Norse. But beneath it, a translation—in Greta's hand again. The Book of the Sun. He flipped open the pages. "Ezekiel 6:16: Test the Messiah, and the mountains will hide us from Him. But He is already among us. And the earth remembers His hunger. No ark shall save, for this is the beginning of one."

The words slithered into his mind. He read them again. And again. A biblical verse—twisted. Corrupted. Ezekiel didn't say that. He knew it didn't. He'd gone to church as a child, memorizing passages. That verse didn't exist. Not like that. It was about the morning star. Not mountains and messiahs. And yet... the more he read it, the more it felt true, like a forgotten memory clawing its way to the surface.

Then the book fell shut—on its own—with a sound like a door sealing.

He staggered back, dropping it. The photograph fluttered to the floor, Greta's face staring up at him, that unnatural smile locked in place. But now... was it his imagination? The angle had changed. Her eyes—had they always been that dark? And the man beside her... Had his hand been resting on her shoulder before? Or was it now over her, possessive, protective?

A sound from the hallway.

A wet, clicking noise—like stones grinding in a throat.

Elias frowned. He hadn't closed the bedroom door behind him. It still stood open, the dim hallway light bleeding in. But now, the shadows pooled thicker like smoke. And from the corner, beyond the reach of the light, something shifted. Not stepped. Unfolded. Long limbs, bent at impossible angles. A shadow with weight. With purpose.

The book lay on the floor between him and the door. The photograph was faced up, and now—now—he could swear the words had changed. "My Lamb" was still there. But beneath it, fresh ink bloomed across the paper like blood seeping through cloth. The thing in the corner took a step. Not a footfall. More like roots

cracking through soil. A low hum vibrated through the floorboards, rising from deep beneath the house. From the earth.

Elias' breath came in sharp scoff. He thought of Greta's stories. Of how trolls couldn't cross running water. Of how they feared iron and fire. But those were tales. Comforts. Myths.

This wasn't a myth.

This was a summoning.

And Greta hadn't been taken.

She had invited.

Elias slipped his hand into the pocket of his jacket, the cold metal of his phone steady against the whispering walls. The old photograph on the cracked wooden table—an amber-tinted portrait of a family whose eyes seemed to follow him—glowed faintly in the flickering candlelight. He lifted the phone, its screen a black void that swallowed the room's shadows, and held it over the image as if it might exorcise it.

A soft click cut through the silence, but the sound was swallowed by the house's sighing timber, and the flash lit the room for an instant, revealing a fleeting ripple across the photograph's surface, as if the painted faces were breathing.

Without a word, Elias slipped the phone back into his pocket, his fingers brushing the worn edge of the frame. He nudged the photograph back into its original crooked slot and turned his back on it. The door creaked shut behind him, and the heavy, thick air of the room closed up. As he stepped into the hallway, the darkness pressed in, and the photograph, even though back in the book, had burnt itself into his memory.

Elias stepped out of the room, the door groaning shut behind him. He paused on the top step, his foot hovering above the wood, because something was wrong. Not the silence, but the absence of it. The house didn't creak. No children yelled from downstairs. There was nothing.

His gaze dropped to the third stair down—the spot where the ticks had writhed only moments before. They'd been small, black, pulsing things, clinging to the grain like spilled ink given life. He'd crushed one

under his heel, felt the sickening pop, but the others... they'd scattered. Into the cracks. Under the baseboard. Into the walls.

Now, the stairs looked unblemished. Too unblemished.

Slowly, Elias rose and forced his feet forward, descending one step at a time. The wood groaned beneath him, but it wasn't the sound of old timber. It was a sound of pressure. Of something pushing up from below.

Halfway down, he glanced back.

The third stair bulged slightly. A black pinprick appeared at its center—then split open, glistening.

The silence was too heavy—until a sharp thud-thud-thud echoed behind him. Kai, the younger boy, no older than eight, burst into view, his breath ragged, eyes wide in the pale glow. "Why are you here?" the child hissed, clutching a stuffed bear like a weapon.

Elias froze. He shouldn't have been there. Not again.

"Looking for the cat," he muttered, forcing a smile that felt like a mask. The last time he'd seen the cat, it had been slinking near the garage, its eyes too bright in the dark. But now, the house swallowed all sound but his own pulse.

Kai's gaze darted past him, and Elias turned as Karina appeared, her silhouette framed in the dim hallway light.

She was 29, a few years younger, but time had carved her into something sharper—edges of a blade honed by sleepless nights. Her stare locked onto Elias, all suspicious. "Kai, go back," she ordered, her voice syrup and venom.

The boy hesitated, then vanished like a moth snuffed out.

"You shouldn't be here," Karina said, stepping closer. Her perfume was too sweet, cloying, as if trying to mask something older and more rotten.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

“Looking for the cat,” he said quickly. Too quickly. He forced a hollow laugh. “She ran up here earlier. I was playing with her—tossing that little mothball thing she likes. But then she disappeared. I can’t find her anywhere.”

Karina didn’t move. Her gaze swept the room, landing on the loose floorboard near the door—slightly raised, as if recently pried. “You were playing with her?” she repeated, voice low.

“Yeah.” He wiped his palms on his jeans. “Is that illegal, or what?”

Karina’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You know, when I came in, the back door was open. And there was... a trail. Little red drops, leading up the stairs.”

His breath hitched.

“I followed them,” she continued, “right to this room. And now you’re telling me the cat’s missing?”

“She—she must’ve scratched herself on something!” Elias said.

He said nothing. Couldn’t.

Then, from beneath the floor, a low mew—not a cry, but a growl. “There she is,” called out Karina and scooped Brunost up in her arms. “You shouldn’t run off, you know that.” She scolded the cat.

Elias chuckled. “Found her. I have to go now, you know,” he said, pulling out his garden gloves from his back pocket.

“What are you doing here?”

“I told you—I was—”

“Lying,” she interrupted. Her gaze flicked to the empty space behind him, and Elias turned. Nothing but the stairs, descending into shadow. “You’re not here for the cat,” she whispered.

He let out a shuddering shrug, the sound echoing like a dying gasp. “You’ve caught me,” he laughs, his voice ragged. “This house... it’s massive, ok? I was curious... Can you blame me?”

***

The wallpaper dissolved into corn stalks as Elias stepped onto the creaking patio where his uncle Jasper sat on the rusted glider, his gnarled hands wrapped around a cup of tea that had gone cold hours ago. The air smelled of damp wood and something acrid, like burnt sugar.

"They said I'm strange," Elias began, his voice steady but tight, as if the words themselves might shatter. "One of the kids. Someone said I... creep them out."

"And you're worried?" asks Jaspar, without lifting his head from the smoking tea. "Maybe you are strange. Or maybe people simply fear what they don't understand." There was a pause, heavy as a funeral. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing." Elias shifted, the plastic chair groaning beneath him. "But... I think I know why they think so. The way I look at things. The way I... move sometimes. Like I'm not quite here." He glanced at his uncle, but Jasper's face was a mask of calm, his milky eyes reflecting the first flickers of distant streetlights. "Is that... normal?"

Jasper didn't answer. Instead, he pointed a trembling finger toward the yard. "Look," he murmured.

Elias turned. In the fading light, a group of children huddled near the edge of the lawn, their laughter high-pitched. They were playing Rabbit. A line of flour snaked across the grass, crooked and jagged, as though drawn by a possessed hand. One child, smaller than the rest, crouched like a predator at the trail's end, their face shadowed beneath a frayed hood. The others—the rabbits—danced along the line, their sneakers kicking up white dust that clung to their socks like powdered bone.

"They use flour to mark the path," Jasper said, his voice a low rumble. "The wolf has to track them. But if the wolf catches you... you become part of the trail."

Elias's throat tightened. "That's not how you play, is it?"

Jasper didn't answer. He only watched as the game unfolded, the children's giggles spiraling into shrieks as the wolf lunged.

One rabbit tripped, their knees sinking into the flour as the boy—the wolf—pounced. The other children scattered, their shadows stretching like distorted shadows across the cold grass. When the children rose, the wolf was no longer alone—the captured child stood beside it, their face pale, their hands dusted in white.

The game continued, but Elias couldn't look away from the trail. Flour still clung to the ground where the rabbits had trod, twisting through cracks in the soil. He felt it then—a pull, deep and insistent, like something beneath his skin was reaching for the line, whispering follow, follow, follow. His fingers twitched. His breath came shallow.

"You shouldn't go there," Jasper said, as if reading his thoughts.

"I'm not going," Elias lied.

A sound behind him made him freeze. Not the children's laughter, but something deeper—a gurgle, like a child humming underwater. He turned slowly. The patio was empty. Jasper's chair stood abandoned, the tea gone, the cup shattered on the floorboards.

Elias hesitated.

Logic screamed at him to stop, but logic had never understood the things he felt—the way the world seemed to tilt when he blinked too long at a flickering light, the way certain shadows refused to move when he passed. He stepped into the brambles; the flour was now little more than a faint etching—and realized with dawning horror that the trail was thicker here, as though something had walked it backward.

Then he saw the first body.

It was a child, or had been. Now it was a husk, its limbs splayed at awkward angles, its mouth frozen in a silent scream. The flour grew from its ribs, a white vine curling from the cavity of its chest. Beyond it, the trail continued, undeterred.

A handmade doll lay abandoned on the floor, its stitched eyes gouged out, jagged threads pooling like blood. He reached to touch it—and the room plunged into darkness.

"Got you," whispered a voice, high and grating, right behind him.

He spun. Nothing. Then—a giggle echoed from the corner of the barn.

The door creaked open. Inside: a child, wide-eyed and grinning, face smeared with flour or soot, clutching the doll. But its head twisted 180 degrees, and the stitches on its chest bled real, slow red drops.

The child lunged. “Got you!” and tapped him on the leg, only to run straight outside of the barn without another word.

He halted at the threshold, his breath ragged and silent, as though sound itself had been swallowed by the waiting dark. The wind died. No crickets. No rustle of rodents in the dry husks of corn. The creak of rotting wood and something beneath it—something low, wet, and rhythmic, like a heartbeat pulsing up through the soil.

Elias turned, eyes scanning the tree line. The woods stood frozen, branches twisted into skeletal hands.

Elias tugged at the cuffs of his white shirt, the fabric unraveling beneath his nails like dead skin. The bulbs in the cluttered room flicker, casting his gaunt reflection in a warped mirror—pale eyes glinting, jaw too sharp, as though his bones are gnawing inward. He runs his hands through his hair, but it’s not hair anymore. Strands snap like brittle twigs, shedding pitch-black flakes that swirl to the floor like ash. By the time he rolls the last sleeve past his elbows, the shadows have teeth too. They’re gnawing at the edges of the light, and Elias laughs. It sounded like shattering glass.

The soles of his boots crunch against the farmyard earth, then sink silently into the moss-draped threshold of the woods. A line—unseen but absolute—separates the two worlds. Beyond it, the air thickens, the light leaching out like blood from a wound. He pauses, shoulders hunched, as if the trees might swallow him whole if he moves wrong. Their branches claw at the sky, twisted into glyphs that whisper beyond the range of hearing. It’s watching. He knows.

“I know you’re here.” His voice frays at the edges.

The woods don’t respond, but the silence that follows is a thing alive, creeping up around him.

A rustle, low and guttural, shivers through the underbrush. Shadows writhe where there’s no light.

Then—something moved. A flicker of something wrong between the trunks, too tall. His breath fogs the air, ragged.

Elias turned his head, the hollow of his throat tightening as his eyes—cold, unblinking—pierced the black maw of the forest.

The trees loomed like skeletal sentinels, their branches clawing at a sky bruised with dead-gray clouds. Somewhere beyond the tangled underbrush, a presence stirred, a whisper of breath that never quite reached his ears.

"You don't have to come out," he rasped, the words crawling over his cracked lips. He crossed his arms over his chest, the fabric of his coat snapping against his knuckles, and the shadows seemed to recoil, as if listening for the tremor in his voice. "It's fine. I'll freeze here, solid as the ice that will swallow me whole."

A high-pitched, childlike chuckle rustled from the thicket.

Elias lingered at the fringe of the forest, where the trees seemed to inhale the dusk and exhale a cold, damp breath.

From the cracked patio below, Jasper's voice cracked the night like a shattering pane. "Elias, what are you doing up there?" he shouted, his tone trembling between curiosity and dread. The words ricocheted off the pines, scattering like moths in a storm.

A thin, startled gasp escaped Elias as he craned his head toward the dim light. "Picking up a toy," he called back, the phrase absurdly sweet.

He crouched, his shoulders hunching as if the very ground beneath him resisted his weight. He reached for nothing, his fingers closing around empty air, the phantom of a child's plaything that never existed.

His gaze flicked down, settling on his own shoes. He began to tie and untie his laces with a mechanical rhythm, each knot a small, desperate tether to sanity. The rope slipped through his fingers, tightening then loosening.

The silence cracked once more as a low, guttural chuckle rose from the trees, and Jasper's scream—now a ragged howl—was swallowed whole by the forest's hungry maw. At that moment, Elias realized the toy he pretended to pick up was not a toy at all.

"You're not supposed to be out here, you know—" He pressed his palm against the bark, feeling the roughness of it and the cold slick of something else, and continued.

"There you are," he says, voice warm with forced tenderness. "You shouldn't play so far out. It's not safe."

The shadow slumps backwards, as if afraid the light would burn its hands.

Elias laughs, soft and reassuring. "See?" he calls over his shoulder. "A lost ball. I'll get it back to them." No one sees the way Elias' fingers uncurl. No one hears the whisper.

From the far corner, a ragged chorus of children's giggles—thin, strained—drifted through the cold air, as if the building itself were trying to lull them into a false sense of safety.

He slipped from the shadows, his boots scuffing the cracked earth with a sound that seemed too loud for the silence. His hand slipped into the depths of his tattered coat and withdrew a single, mottled ball. The thing was no ordinary toy; it was black as midnight, its surface mottled with faint scribbles. The words echoed off the barn's swinging husks, sounding back with a hollow echo.

The children turned their wide eyes, but something in those pupils was wrong—an unsettling wideness, as if a part of their joy had already been taken away.

He lifted the ball high, its glow casting shadows that danced across the barn's interior. He turned his back on the children, the ball still clutched like a cursed relic, and cast one final, lingering glance into the abyss that hungrily lapped at the edges of his vision.

The darkness answered with a low, guttural whisper. As he stepped toward the barn doorway, the wooden boards beneath his feet shivered, as if the structure itself were alive—breathing, waiting.

The child had come too close to the edge of the cornfield again, their face unsure, as if scared to approach.

"You saw things," murmured Elias, his voice a dry stream bed. "Didn't you? You're scared." His eyes, pale as

ash, locked onto the child's—eight years old. The ball trembled in the boy's grip, its stitched seams coming loose. "Don't tell the others. We don't want... them to get angry at you."

The child swallowed hard, their throats working like they'd swallowed a stone. "Angry?"

"What do you think happens if you see something bad here? Do you think you will stay here?"

"We would move?" the child asked, its eyes widening.

"Yes, and all your friends would be gone, right?"

The child stared at Elias, her eyes widening until they seemed to swallow the dim light coming from the lantern. Her eyes lock onto his. He can feel the tremor in her throat, the way the words he whispered clawed their way into the silence between them.

She blinks, fighting the tide of tears that rises like a storm behind her lashes. And Elias watches, half-amused, half-horrified, as the world tilts.

His words echoed in the stale air, tearing at something deep within her. "But what if it was bad?" The words spilled out, desperate, as if spoken aloud they might become true.

"Do you want to know a secret?" he asks. Elias smiled then—a slow curve of his lips brushed over his face.

His fingers flexed around the rubber ball, and for a flicker of a moment, the child thought she saw his skin shift, like wooden bark peeling back to reveal something gnarled beneath. "Especially then," he whispered, his voice a coil, as he leaned in until his breath, cold as a cellar, ghosted her ear. "We'd hate for your fear to... stir chaos."

The child trembled, her tears spilling like hinges. Elias knelt, his movements too fluid, and brushed the wetness away with calloused thumbs. "Don't cry," he murmured. "If you stay quiet, nothing happens. Ok?"

She nodded, small and jerky, and extended her pinky. "Ok," she whispered.

"Good," Elias said, his voice soft as rotting leaves. He shook her tiny finger with his own, his grip firm. Any harder and he'd crush her bones.

But when she took the ball—her ball, bright and fractured—something slick clung to her palm. Blood? Or

something thicker, darker, like sap? The others waited at the fence, their laughter distant.

He gripped her shoulder as they turned to leave, his thumb pressing into her collarbone. “Good girl,” he purred. “Let’s play, shall we?”

The ball grew heavier with every step, its surface no longer rubber but something fleshy, something warm. A heart, he realized, or the imitation of one—still, but thrumming in time with his pulse. Each beat synced to her footfalls, a silent, growing noise.

Ada glanced back at Elias, but his face had blurred in her tear-streaked vision, melting into a hollow mask, eyes too deep, mouth a slit.

Mary had a Little Lamb

Chapter 9: Kristian

Your will is a kingdom, and you are its sole monarch. To surrender it is the only true blasphemy. — Joseph 2:12

When Kristian finally cornered Maren in the dim hallway, the air seemed to thicken around them, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath.

“What’s happening?” he asked, voice barely louder than the low hum of the old fluorescent lights flickering overhead.

Maren stared at the scarred plaster, her eyes tracing the outline of a hole that shouldn't exist—no cat, no mouse, a perfect crack that swallowed the weak glow of the bulbs. "I've never seen anything like this," she whispered, the words trembling like a moth's wings. "Not even when I summoned him."

She had called him—their Lord—through the ancient sigil she'd etched on the attic floor, hoping for answers. Instead, the figure that turned up was a mask of calm, his eyes fixed on some invisible horizon.

"He never answered my question," said Maren, the memory tightening her throat. "He drifted away, his smile too rehearsed, his posture too composed for someone who'd witnessed a rupture."

Kristian felt a prickle rise along his spine as the hole in the wall seemed to pulse, a faint, ticking throb that matched the quickening beat of his heart. It was small—no larger than a child's palm—but it exhaled a chill that scraped the skin off his bones.

The whisper that escaped it was not a wind, but a low sigh that seemed to speak a language older than Futhark, older than words.

"Do you feel it?" he asked, almost afraid to hear his own voice.

Maren's eyes widened. "It's not the cat. It's something... something that wants to be let out." She pressed her hand against the cold timber, feeling the faint vibration of an unseen presence pressing back. The hallway grew darker, the lights sputtering into a steady, eerie glow that painted the corners in shades of blood. Shadows stretched, forming shapes that flickered like the remains of a half-remembered nightmare.

"Elias avoided the question because the answer is too terrible to speak," Maren finally confessed, her voice strained. "He knows that if we stare into it too long, it will stare back."

"Or because he thinks we're hiding something," says Kristian, partially confused that the thought hadn't crossed Maren's mind yet.

The hole seemed to widen for a heartbeat, then snapped shut with a sound like a throat being swallowed. The air cleared, but the taste of iron lingered on their tongues, and the faint echo of a distant, unearthly laugh lingered in the hallway. Kristian and Maren stood frozen, aware that whatever had slipped through

that tiny breach would not be satisfied with a single glimpse. It would wait, patient and hungry, for the day when curiosity turned into a scream.

Maren's breath fogged in the air as her thumb grazed the hole in the wall—a gaping wound in the plaster, its edges darkened with something that looked suspiciously like rusted, dead animals.

Kristian doesn't move from the railing, his arms locked, knuckles pressed into his biceps as if holding himself together.

"The last time something like this happened," she says, her voice low but vibrating, as though the wall was listening, "Was when my mother cursed the Lord and the ground cracked open and swallowed her whole."

Her fingers twitch at her side. The hole doesn't look like a hole anymore—more like a mouth, barely closed.

Kristian's stare is final. "And you're sure it wasn't a rockslide?" His laugh is a dry rasp, but Maren doesn't smile.

"He said his mother died, didn't he?" His eyes flickered to the dim corner where Maren sat, shoulders hunched like a wilted plant.

Maren shook her head, a thin, trembling motion that sent a shiver through the stale air. "Not to me," she whispered, the words barely rising above the hiss of the storm.

"Did he say what frightens him?" Kristian pressed, his fingers drumming an impatient rhythm on the banister.

"No," answered Maren, her gaze drifting to the cheap keyring that she'd seen on him the first time they met on the floor—a glossy reptile, its jeweled eyes catching the weak light. "He's obsessed with reptiles, though; I saw it on his keyring. And there's a hair tie tangled in the cord—maybe a girlfriend, maybe a daughter. Maks should know. He hired him."

Kristian scoffed, the sound flat and hollow. "Or perhaps something else entirely."

"Are you going to talk to Maks?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, as if the walls themselves might carry her words to him. Kristian didn't look at her. His gaze stayed fixed down the dim corridor, where

shadows pooled beneath flickering overhead lights, stretching and recoiling like something breathing.

“Yes,” he lied, the word hollow, as though pulled from a place deeper than sound. “Soon.”

Maren exhaled sharply, a sound caught between impatience. "Don't let him wait," Maren muttered, eyes narrowing. Her tone wasn't a suggestion.

Kristian finally turned to her, and for a heartbeat, she saw it—the flicker of hesitation, the unspoken question. “I need to do something first, then I will talk to him.”

“Today?” asks Maren.

“Yes, today,” he lies with a stern nod. “You have my word.”

Maren nodded, her fingers curling around the cold wood of the banister, the grain rough beneath her touch as if the house itself were breathing beneath her skin. Her eyes drifted to the row of framed photographs lining the wall—frozen moments pretending at normalcy. One showed a girl riding a chestnut horse, wind whipping through her braids—Greta, smiling like she believed in a future. Kristian stood beyond the frame’s edge, a shadow half-swallowed by the blur of motion, too distant to matter. Another picture captured Ben knee-deep in riverwater, grinning like a boy who’d outwitted fate, the silver fish thrashing in his grip. So painfully cliché—life as a postcard, all sunlit triumphs and easy victories.

Then she saw her. Dagmar.

The photograph was smaller, somber. A single dried lavender stem lay across the top of the frame as if someone kept replacing it out of habit—or guilt. Maren stepped closer, the floorboard groaning underfoot. She tapped the glass lightly. “I don’t want to end up like her,” she whispered.

Kristian clenched his teeth, it took a while before his gaze dropped onto the picture of Dagmar. “You won’t.”

Maren’s shrug is too slow, intentional, as if the motion itself is an afterthought to something far older. Her hand hovers in the dim stairwell air—a pale silhouette against the rotting wood steps.

“Blessed be the morning star,” she murmurs.

Kristian stares, his brow knitting as shadows pool in the corners of his eyes. The phrase grates against the silence, sacred and wrong, like a hymn sung in a language that once unraveled the world.

His palm meets hers, cold and damp. “Blessed be,” he echoes, the words raw, a sacrifice.

Maren doesn’t flinch. Her fingers remain locked in his, as though drawing something from him—a breath, a memory, the hollow click of a door closing somewhere deep in his bones.

When she finally turns, her silhouette stretches long and crooked up the stairs, dissolving into the gloom like mist. The air hums, a static that clings to Kristian’s skin as he steps into the room she’s abandoned.

The door groans shut behind him, but the unease lingers—thick, pressing, alive, each wooden floorboard groaned under his weight, each step screaming like a dying thing as Kristian climbed toward his room. The air was thick with dust and something cooler, snow, perhaps, or the scent of it anyway. Once inside, he locked the door—not that it mattered; nothing physical could keep it out.

He stripped off his shirt, the scars on his back catching the dim moonlight like ancient runes. With steady hands, he unraveled the rusted chain coiled beside his bed.

The first strike was always the loudest, a sharp crack against his spine that echoed through the silence.

Pain flared, raw and purifying. He welcomed it. He needed it. As blood beaded along fresh welts, he began to pray—mumbled, desperate words to a god who never answered.

Then—a creak. Then another one as the weight shifted on the floorboard.

The sound froze him mid-swing. His breath hitched. The room, already cold, seemed to drop ten degrees.

He turned slowly, the chain slipping from his fingers with a hollow rattle.

The door was ajar.

And in the gap, small and pale, stood a girl.

Ada lingered in the doorway of Kristian’s dimly lit room, the hem of her nightdress whispering against the cracked wooden floor.

Her dark hair was cascading over her shoulders in loose waves. A small hair accessory featuring colorful beads is clipped near her forehead. The striped cream-colored linen top was far too big on her.

A thin, blood-red ribbon—barely a thread—was looped between her long, trembling fingers, the scarlet hue catching the weak bulb's flicker as if it were a pulse of something alive. She stared at Kristian, first at the jagged, pale scars that lined his spine like a map of old wars, then at the fresh copper-red stains that still clung to the torn shirt he wore. The scent of iron lingered in the air, a metallic reminder that something had been torn apart and sewn back together, but not without cost.

"Elias got angry when I was outside," she said, her voice a hollow echo that seemed to draw the shadows closer to the walls.

Kristian's hand, still slick with the remains of blood, slipped from the leather whip coiled at his feet. He pulled a plain, grey T-shirt from the back of a battered chest and shoved it over his head with an almost ritualistic motion.

The fabric crunched, muffling the faint thump of his heart.

"What do you mean 'angry'?" asked Kristian, his tone flat, as if he'd heard the question a thousand times and each answer had been the same—silence.

He patted the empty space beside the narrow, unmade bed, a silent invitation that felt less like a gesture of hospitality and more like an offering. Ada hesitated, the red ribbon twining tighter around her fingers as if the very act of waiting were a knot tightening around her throat. Then, almost hesitantly, she sank onto the cold mattress, the fabric of her dress rustling like dry leaves, and in her hand—the red ball.

Ada tugs at her sleeve, shrugging slightly. "Not angry like Ben—he didn't shout. He was quiet... like Uncle Erik used to be."

Kristian's chest tightens. "He disciplined you?" The words come out careful, almost hushed, as if he's afraid of the answer. A small weight lifts when she nods, her eyes dropping to her lap.

"Yes," Ada whispers. "And I didn't say anything back—because the commandments say we must honor our elders and I— I was scared that—" Her voice wavers, not with defiance, but with something deeper—resignation, maybe, or quiet sorrow.

Kristian feels the familiar ache of understanding. "I know," he interrupts softly. "I know." He doesn't need her to explain.

Kristian shifts cautiously, the fabric of his T-shirt clinging to the fresh, raw welts on his back, each movement sending a sharp sting through his skin. He reaches out, gently rubbing Ada's arm, his touch feather-light, as if afraid she might vanish. Blood has soaked through the cotton, warm. Pain was only an illusion, something he wouldn't allow himself to feel. Still, he turns his head to look at her, jaw tight against the pain, searching her face for reassurance.

Kristian leaned over and lightly tapped Ada's shoulder, his smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Hey, how about we head over to Maks? He'll make you a hot chocolate that's practically a hug in a mug."

Ada's eyes widened, a spark of excitement lighting up the dim hallway. She sprang to her feet, thrusting out her hand with a grin that made the stale air feel a little warmer. Without a word, Kristian slipped his fingers around hers, and the two slipped out of the room together, their steps echoing against the worn tiles.

As they turned the corner, Kristian couldn't help glancing back at the cracked wall they'd left. The silence was thick, but when his breath finally steadied, a faint, unsettling sound rose from the hardwood floor—a slow crawling, as if something were clawing its way through the building's very bones. The noise was barely audible, yet it gnawed at the edges of his thoughts. Then they passed the arrangement of photos, the one of Dagmar, and he remembered what Maren said. *I don't want to end up like her.*

The lights of the hallway hummed faintly as Kristian collided with Ben's smirking shadow. Ben leaned casually against the windowpane at the end of the corridor, his usual air of easy arrogance undimmed.

"I talked to Elias," Kristian said, arms crossing tightly over his chest. His voice was steady, but his fingers twitched at the seams of his sleeves.

“So?” Ben shrugged, the movement flippant, dismissive. “Doesn’t mean much.”

Kristian’s jaw clenched. He pushed up his sleeves, a mindless habit that gave his hands something to do while his brain raced. “He told me about what happened at the lake. With Greta.”

A flicker of something—defensiveness, maybe—crossed Ben’s face before he masked it with a smirk. “What happened?” His knuckles whitened against the knob of the door betrayed his indifference.

Kristian’s eyes narrowed. “What you did to her.”

Ben laughed then—bitter, a sound that he choked on a second later. “Really?” he said, stepping closer. “You too? You're gonna start judging me like everyone else?” His voice dipped, a warning beneath the mockery. “She’s my wife. And him? He’s Bliss, especially you shouldn’t believe him.”

Kristian’s nostrils flared. He had no love for Ben but this—this was different. “Yes, he is, and it doesn’t bother me because I care about Greta,” he said, voice low but firm. “And I know you’re family... but that doesn’t mean you get to—”

“Adopted,” Ben cut in, the word a knife. A jab at the unspoken truth that had colored their relationship for years.

Kristian’s lips pressed into a thin line. The room was spinning with the weight of all the unsaid things between them—the way Ben had never cared to be the golden boy until a golden boy showed up. But Greta wasn’t a person to be shielded by the Brekker’ bloodline, and Kristian had finally stopped pretending it was his place to fight for her. Until now.

“Right,” he muttered, and before Ben could react, he wrenched his sleeves up entirely, baring his forearms in a gesture that was half defiance, half prelude.

His hands shot forward, gripping Ben’s throat with a force that made the other boy stagger back. The wall hit the back of Ben’s head with a muted thud, and for a heartbeat, time seemed to freeze—Ben’s wide, startled eyes locked on Kristian’s, the kind of shock that didn’t come from pain, but from shock.

Then the crack echoed through the corridor.

Ben's knees buckled, his hands flying to his skull as he lurched forward, clutching the back of his head. A strangled gasp escaped him before he sank to his knees, fingers now cradling his stomach as if the blow had rattled more than his brain.

Kristian didn't let go, his grip like a vice as Ben slid down the wall, blood seeping through his fingers and trailing down his neck.

"You're going to regret this," hissed Ben, his voice thick and slurred.

Kristian was already crouching in front of him, one hand yanking Ben's hair to tilt his face upward. The older boy's eyes were unfocused, pupils uneven, the telltale signs of a bad concussion. Kristian almost felt pity that it was only that.

"Regret's a luxury for people who don't make threats like yours," Kristian said, his voice colder than he'd ever directed at Ben before. "Touch her again, and I won't be the one you have to worry about." He released him, stepping back as the hallway fell silent.

Ben let out a broken snort, wiping the blood from the back of his head with a trembling hand. "You're a fool," he muttered, though it came out more like a breath than a shout.

Kristian didn't respond. He stood there, chest heaving, as Ben stumbled to his feet and disappeared around the corner, leaving behind a faint trail of crimson on the dark green shiplap wall panels that missed the crack almost by purpose.

Kristian slipped a clean handkerchief from his pocket, the thin fabric cool against his palm as he pressed it to the wall. The bright red smear—still fresh from the sudden scuffle that had erupted moments before—streaked across the panel. He stared at the wall, wondering whether wiping away the evidence could also erase the anger that drove him there, and vowed that the next confrontation would be settled with his voice, not his fists.

Kristian glanced at the watch tucked in his pocket, the thin metal glinting in the dim light. He slipped his shoes on and descended the creaking stairs, the wooden steps groaning under each footfall as if warning him to turn back.

At the bottom, the kitchen window offered a clear view of the two-story red house across the lane, its paint peeling in places like old scars. Maks stood on the porch, a bottle of wine balanced in one hand, the other sweeping the dusty shutters clean of the night's grime.

The porch was flanked by a row of dead pearl-white flower pots, their cracked ceramic shells littered with wilted petals that whispered of forgotten celebrations.

Kristian paused at the handrail, his breath catching on the bitter chill that rose from the damp earth. He stared at the ruined pots, the emptiness they represented, before his voice cut through the quiet, sharp as a cracked twig. "I'm not here for permission," he said, his tone low but edged with fury. "I'm telling you I cracked Ben's skull."

Maks froze mid-swing, the rag dropping from his hand as his eyes widened. Anger flickered across his face like a sudden flare. "You did what?" he demanded, the word snapping in the cold air.

"It's not a question," Kristian replied, his voice surprisingly calm. He turned his head toward the farmhouse beyond the porch, where the shadows of the night still clung to the roofline. "He's alive, but he hurt Margareta." He let the words settle, each one a stone dropped into a still pond.

Maks opened his mouth to protest, but Kristian shook his head, the motion swift and decisive. "This isn't the first time something like this has happened, and it won't be the last. I'm not here to apologize—I'm here so you know what's happening." His eyes narrowed, landing once more on the dead flower pots, a silent accusation of neglect and decay. "You think you can sweep the porch clean and pretend everything's fine. You can't. Not while blood's still on the floor."

Maks clenched his fists, the rum bottle slipping from his grip and shattering against the porch rail, the sound echoing like a warning shot. Kristians's shoulders relaxed a fraction, his message delivered, his anger simmering beneath a veneer of unflinching resolve.

Maks clenches his jaw so tightly it aches, his fingers curling into fists at his sides. "I will deal with him," he growls, voice low and rough like gravel beneath a boot.

Kristian steps forward, calm and unshaken, placing a firm hand on Maks's shoulder. "No," he says, quietly. "He is dealt with. He paid the price. The Lord has forgiven him."

Maks shakes his head, disbelief cracking through his anger. "I didn't know he—" he starts, voice trembling with the weight of unfinished thoughts.

"I know," Kristian interrupts, softer now, almost sad. "Me neither."

The air between them crackled with unspoken fury, the kind that simmers beneath the surface.

Maks leaned against the crumbling brick wall, his jaw tight, eyes fixed on the distant flicker of streetlights. Kristian, restless, shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, the metallic clink of loose change echoing his agitation. "I thought about going out with Greta," he said, voice low but edged with determination. "Soliciting. A few blocks from here."

Maks didn't flinch, but his knuckles whitened against the wall. "Where exactly?" The question came out sharper than he'd intended.

Kristian shrugged, almost dismissive. "Don't know yet. I'll send you my location. But I need to get her the hell away from this place. Away from Ben." His name was a hiss, a snake spitting venom.

Maks nodded, the motion slow. "He wasn't always like that."

Inside, Kristian's stomach churned—a mix of anger, guilt, and something closer to fear. He wanted to argue, to scream, to punch something. Instead, he muttered, "I understand," the lie thick and bitter.

Kristian hesitates. "I'm worried about Elias; something about him isn't right."

"What do you mean, not right? I did the background check; there is nothing that came up. He's fine."

“I’m not too sure,” says Kristian, his head shaking. “Call it a hunch.”

"There's something unsettling about the way he connects with people," Kristian said, his voice low.

Maks shrugged, unimpressed. "He's friendly. So what?"

"No, not just friendly," Kristian insisted, leaning in.

"I saw him with Greta yesterday. They fell into conversation with ease, finishing each other's thoughts. He looked at her not like a stranger, but like a memory he was beginning to place. It's less like making a new friend and more like recalling an old one, and it feels fundamentally wrong."

The silence that followed was worse than the shouting. Kristian turned, already walking away, leaving Maks to rot in his own helplessness. The plan was reckless, dangerous—suicidal—but Maks knew better than to stop him. Some fires burn too hot to put out. And some friends choose to dance in the flames. And Greta, unfortunately, was drawn to it like a moth.

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It was well past midnight when they slipped back onto the farm’s weather-worn porch, the night air still heavy with the scent of fresh rain. Greta’s breath puffed in short, impatient bursts as she vaulted up the creaking wooden steps, her boots slapping the boards with a rhythm that sounded almost happy against the night’s hush.

Behind her, Kristian moved at a slower pace, his boots thudding softly on the uneven planks as if each step was measured against a hidden weight he carried.

"Esja is dead," Greta whispered, the words barely disturbing the dust motes dancing in the single shaft of grey light. She didn't look at Kristian but stared at the dark velvet of the curtains, as if an answer might be woven into the fabric. "They said it was... an accident. Did you know?"

Kristian’s head turned toward her with a slow, unnerving grace. His hand rose from his lap, fingers stretching not toward her, but into the empty space between them, as if grasping at a memory only he could see.

"Oh, I knew," he murmured, his voice devoid of sorrow, filled instead with a terrible certainty. "I pray the Lord finds her purified in the fire."

A cold dread, colder than the room's chill, seized Greta. Her voice cracked. “Everyone I love dies. Is that the Lord’s will? How does that make sense?”

"The Lord’s will is not meant to make sense," he stated softly, his eyes fixed on something far beyond the room's walls. "It is only meant to be obeyed." Letting his hand fall, he added, almost as an afterthought, "There were robins, you see."

Greta finally turned to face him, her breath catching in her throat. The way he said it, with a faint, knowing smile, was more terrifying than any shout. Her own voice was a ghostly rasp. "Were there?"

“Be quiet.” His voice is colder, his hand frozen in motion. He looks over his shoulder. “Did you hear that?”

He paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs, his eyes drifting upward toward the farmhouse that loomed dark against the sky. A single window on the second floor burned with a steady, amber glow, a solitary beacon in the sea of black that surrounded the property. The light flickered, casting warm rectangles on the curtains inside, and for a heartbeat Kristian could almost swear that he’d seen a shadow.

Greta didn’t notice his stare. She was already at the top of the stairs, her hands gripping the rail as she turned to glance back at her companion.

“What? Did you hear anything?” Her voice was barely louder than the rustle of the barley that swayed in the wind below.

Kristian’s shoulders tightened. “Nothing,” he replied, his tone flat, though his mind replayed the day’s canvassing—door after door, polite refusals, and a few generous smiles that felt like tiny victories.

Greta’s feet slipped a fraction on the slick wood, and she caught herself, a nervous laugh escaping her lips.

"We made it back in one piece," she said, trying to inject a grin into the silence. "But that lady with the red sweater down the hill? She thought I came to milk her cows."

Kristian yanked off his shoes with a violent tug, his boots thudding to the floor like the hollow echoes of his heartbeat. "Well, can you blame her?" He gestures to Greta's apron. "You could have worn some red or black. You did look like a farm girl."

Greta's brow furrows. "I *am* a farm girl."

The house was dead quiet. The silence hung off the walls like thick, dusty webs. He walked into the living room, and there was Greta, standing in the doorway like a ghost. Even though it was summer, her breath came out in white clouds. She shut the door with a soft *click*, locking them inside. They walked toward the kitchen with heavy, dragging steps, like they were trapped in a dream.

"Did you hear that?" Greta whispered, her voice slicing through the silence.

Kristian shook his head. The question hung between them.

Another sound followed—a creak, wet and slow, like something dragging across wood. Greta's frown deepened, her fingers curling into her sweater. Then it came again: a low, guttural groan, followed by a thud that made the floorboards shiver.

This time, Kristian heard it. His throat tightened. "Now I did. Go to the others, in the prayer room. I'm joining you soon."

She didn't argue. She didn't talk. She left, her feet making no noise as she crept down the hallway, the air thickening with the scent of mildew and something metallic—blood, or rust. Then Kristian saw it.

Two legs, dangling. Motionless.

The hallway light flickered overhead, casting twisted shadows. Kristian's hand hovered near his chest, as if willing his heart back into rhythm. He inched closer, his breath shallow, and the legs shifted slightly. A foot twitched.

"No... no..." Kristian muttered, but the word dissolved into silence.

As he stepped forward, Kristian's shock faded. Ben. Ben.

He dangled from the banister, his body limp, a rope coiled around his neck. But it wasn't the sight that froze him—it was the wound. Not a rope mark. His throat gaped open, dark and raw, a jagged maw of torn flesh. He wasn't hanging. He was suspended.

A gurgle escaped him, low and wet, and the legs kicked once, twice.

The thing that was Ben swayed gently, his feet brushing the doorframe, and the click-click-click of something dragging followed as it tilted its head, those empty eyes locking onto them.

Then the hallway went deathly still.

Ben's body twisted impossibly, his spine cracking with a sound like breaking twigs, before his head swiveled—no, ripped—backward completely. The crack echoed in the hallway, mocking against the silence.

Kristian laughed. It wasn't a laugh. It was a chuckle, hollow and airy, like the wind against the window. He pressed his hands together, palms against each other, fingers pointed down, whispering prayers, and the door behind them slammed shut.

Little Robin Redbreast

Chapter 10: Greta

Let every tongue spin the serpent's threads, for truth is a thief who steals the crown. — Maria 3:19

The air in the prayer room hung thick, heavy with the scent of dried blood that clung to the walls like a secret. Greta knelt on the cold carpet, her spine straight, hands folded in her lap, though her eyes did not lift to the crucifix above. Around her, the circle of pillows was staffed. Karina and David sat beside her on each side, Henrik sat farther away, and Ben hadn't been there at all. But that did not surprise Greta in the slightest; once Maks wasn't present, neither would Ben be. It was always this way—too quiet, too still, as though the room itself was holding its breath. Two seats beside Greta, Karina shot her a glance, nudging her chin. And only then, did Greta's eyes follow her gaze, and fell onto the door.

Kristian filled the doorway like a hole cut out of the light. His outline was sharp and jagged, more like a jagged shadow than a person. He stood there, perfectly still, against the black throat of the hallway. He didn't knock. He never did. Instead, he tilted his head, a single, his gaze locking onto Greta's. Come, his posture whispered. Not a request. A command dressed in patience.

Greta's chin dipped, a slow shake that sent strands of hair slipping over her shoulders. Her head nudged toward the circle—the empty chairs, the altar, the faint stain on the wall where someone had once cleaned up a spill of something red. Kristian's shoulders rose, a shrug that might have been indifference or a surrender.

For a moment, nothing happened. The hum of the lights buzzed louder, or maybe that was just the blood in her ears. Then Greta stood, her skirt a rustle of starched linen as she smoothed it with hands that didn't tremble, though her pulse thrummed in her throat. She had no shoes on. The hardwood bit her soles, cold, as she stepped over the invisible boundary of the circle.

It wasn't true, but to Greta it felt as though as the air got colder the more she neared onto the wall.

Kristian didn't move closer. Didn't have to. His eyes trailed her, and when she halted beside him, the space behind her felt suddenly smaller, the circle of chairs pressing in like a cage she'd only left now.

Kristian's breath was flat. "We need to talk," His tone suggested they were irrelevant.

Greta shook her head, her voice stern. “We’re praying for Esja, you should join.”

Kristian stared at her, no word leaving him. His glance was final. The real audience was in the silence between them, in the way the shadows clung to the corners of the room, stretching longer now, as if something had shifted in the walls.

Greta didn’t look back. She couldn’t. Her socks whispered too-soft against the floor as she followed him into the hallway, where the light was worse—harsh, white, clinical—and the prayers left behind felt like echoes of something that had never been said aloud.

The dim light of the prayer room bled out onto the worn concrete corridor, and Greta slipped from the sanctuary in socks that whispered against the floor like a dying breath.

A thin smile curled on her lips—a smile she pressed into a thin line, as though she were trying to hide a secret she did not yet understand.

Across the hallway, Kristian stood motionless, his coat collar turned up against the cold that seeped through the cracked windows. The flicker of a dying bulb cast his face in flashes, each pulse revealing a glint of something far older than the stone tiles beneath their feet. “I think Cthaoc killed Ben,” he said, his voice a low rasp that seemed to reverberate off the ceilings, as if the very walls were listening.

Greta’s eyes narrowed, the darkness in the corners of the room flickering like fireflies caught in a jar. “Blessed be, no?” she asked, her tone a thin veil over the tremor that rose in her chest. The words hung in the air, tasting of iron and old blood.

Kristian shot her a glare. “He hung himself.” He turned his back, his shoulders hunched as though cradling an invisible weight.

“He wouldn’t do that.” Greta said, the words slipping out like a prayer gone awry. Her breath fogged in the cold, forming small, fleeting ghosts that dissolved the moment they touched the stone.

“Exactly,” Kristian replied, his hands disappearing into the dark depths of his pockets. He drew a slow breath, and for a heartbeat the only sound was the soft rustle of his coat as it settled against the floor. “He wouldn’t. But who would?” His voice softened, slipping into a tone that seemed almost reverent.

“What?” Greta asked at last, her voice trembling like a moth’s wing against glass. She shook her head, trying to sweep away the fog of confusion that clung to her thoughts.

“I think it was the Pothead.” Kristian’s tone was flat, but the word lingered.

“The *who*... Elias?” Greta’s breath caught, each syllable a hesitant step on a bridge. “Why?”

“The way they looked at each other yesterday,” Kristian muttered, his voice barely audible over the low whine of the fluorescent light. “It wasn’t dislike. It felt... deeper.”

“Finally we are acknowledging that ever since he came here, people died like flies.” Greta snapped coldly, the hardwood creaking under her weight, and tried to understand the darkness behind his words. “What do you mean how he looked at him—how?” She swallowed, feeling the metallic taste of her own blood on her tongue.

Kristian’s eyes never left hers; they glowed faintly, reflecting the flicker of the dying bulb. “I’m not sure,” he said, each syllable a stone dropped into a still pond. “But something about him is off. I can feel it.”

The corridor seemed to close in, the walls breathing in rhythm with their uneasy conversation. A sudden gust of wind slipped through a crack in the stained glass, scattering a cascade of dried petals across the floor. Each petal landed with a muted thud.

The hallway was a slab of cold concrete, its dim lighting flickering like a dying pulse. Kristian’s voice cut through the hush, low and urgent. “Where did you see them talking?” he asked, his hand already gesturing toward the spiral staircase that disappeared into shadow. “Let’s go down.”

Greta’s eyes flickered, a brief flash of confusion before the darkness settled over her features. “I don’t remember,” she whispered, the words barely rising above the metallic scent of rust.

With a sudden, almost violent tenderness, Kristian grasped Greta's chin, tilting her head so their faces were inches apart. "Are you... ok?" he demanded, his tone a blend of concern and something sharper, an unspoken accusation.

Greta's breath hitched, but she steadied herself in an instant. She seized his wrist, twisting his hand away with a force that surprised even her. "I'm fine," she snapped, the edge in her voice as crisp as broken glass. "Stop it."

The stairwell was visible behind them, a yawning gap that seemed to swallow the faint light. In that cramped, restrictive space, the question hung heavy—an unvoiced dread that neither could ignore, as the darkness around them grew ever more suffocating.

The hallway's edge was swallowed by the oval window, its glass a warped mirror to the storm. Greta lingered there, her breath fogging the cold pane as the old raindrops hissed against the slick surface. Each droplet carved a path, leaving behind smears.

She tilted her head, studying the stains—thick, uneven, like something congealed—until they blurred into a familiar shape. Ben's blood, she thought, tracing the phantom with her fingertip. The memory clung, relentless: the crimson stain on the shiplap, the hollow crack—and then the long, empty hallway where only shadows lived. Ben's words replayed in her head: Every story ends with you in the slaughterhouse.

But who was in the slaughterhouse now? Whose story ended now?

She pulled away with a scornful grin, her reflection splintering in the glass as thunder rumbled. The hallway's shadows seemed to lean in, whispering of secrets pressed behind the paint-peeled walls, of a boy who'd once raced up these stairs, laughter echoing, now lost to the storm's grip. Greta shivered, the cool light through the window casting her in ghostly relief. She hated how the rain never washed anything clean.

In the dim half-light of the stairwell, Greta slipped her fingers into the worn leather of the boots that lay, half-buried in the dust-caked steps. The metal clasps sang a low, mournful click as she tightened them.

The stairs groaned beneath Greta's feet, each step a protest in the heavy silence that clings to the old house like chains. The wood shudders under his boots—slow, deliberate, inevitable. At the landing, he pauses,

turning back toward the dim glow of the parlor below. Greta stands by the window, her silhouette etched in the bruised twilight seeping through the glass. For a long moment, she doesn't move—just stares out at the trees swaying in the wind, their branches clawing at the darkening sky.

Then, as if pulled by an invisible thread, she turns. Her gaze meets his, hollow and searching, like someone trying to recognize a face from a dream. Without a word, she steps away from the window, the hem of her skirt brushing the dusty floorboards. Her hands slip into the deep pockets, fingers curling around something unseen—perhaps a token, perhaps nothing at all. The air between them thickens, charged with everything left unsaid. Footsteps follow—hers softer, lighter, but no less weighted by the past.

They meet in the dim hallway, shadows stretching long around them, two figures suspended in the quiet gravity of what has happened and what is yet to come. No words pass between them. None are needed. The house breathes around them, creaking in sympathy, as if it, too, remembers what they've tried so hard to forget. And in that suffocating stillness, the truth lingers—beneath the surface, waiting to be spoken aloud. Or unearthed.

Not much later, they stepped from the shadow of the pines toward the crumbling stone path that led to the old church, their breath visible in the cold morning air. The sky hung low, a bruised puzzle of gray and violet, as if the world itself were holding its breath. Before them, Julian emerged from the mist, a bulging sack of wilted flowers slung over his shoulder, petals scattering like ashes in his wake. He moved with urgency, his boots crunching over the earth, eyes fixed on the meadow beyond the church where the soil had grown unnaturally soft. Greta loosened her coat, letting the warm air hit her skin. There was something wrong with the flowers—too pale, too sweet in scent, as if they'd been pulled not from soil but from something deeper, older.

Behind Julian, Ada sprinted barefoot across the uneven ground, a roll of red crepe tape clutched in her trembling hand. The tape fluttered behind her like a wound left unsealed, snagging on thistles and dead branches. Her ankle twisted sharply as she tripped over a root—blackened, gnarled, jutting from the earth

like a warning—but she caught herself against a birch, its bark cracked and weeping sap the color of rust. "Wait!" she cried, voice raw, but Julian didn't turn. None of them did anymore. They all knew where they were going. They'd been called. The meadow wasn't a place now; it was a trap, half-open.

Greta watched him walk by, motionless, for a moment before turning toward Kristian. "I'm not sure I can say that I'm glad he's meeting the Lord anymore."

"Greta—"

"I know."

The wind died as if choked by unseen hands, leaving only the hollow echo of her breath. Kristian moved beside her, his silence deeper than the gathering dark. Greta didn't look at him, but she felt his tension like a bowstring.

And there, against a sky the color of a deep bruise, the stone circle waited. Greta's boots crunched over grass, towering and grey with a killing frost, as she was drawn toward the monoliths. They rose from the barren earth not as perfect monuments, but as cracked, crooked teeth, weathered by the years. Each stone leaned at a different angle, like tired, silent giants huddled together for warmth they could never find.

Greta came to stand beside Kristian, her breath snagging as she took in the hollow-eyed figures encircling the moss-cracked wooden crate. Maks' silhouette was silhouetted at the edge of the ring, his fingers twitching at his sides, while Kai and Ada flanked Karina—her knuckles bone-white around Ada's arm. Before them, the crate split into three shallow compartments: one choked with tangled crepe paper, its edges like veins; another housing two jagged stones, their surfaces slick with dew; and the middle, a nest of musty hay separated by an open jar of honey, its golden glaze thickening in the cold air.

A cold dread coiled in Greta's stomach. How many lazy afternoons, how many sleepless nights had she spent picturing this exact moment—not the gruesome details, but the beautiful, silent void of his absence? She had rehearsed it like a line in a play, a dark and secret fantasy that felt like a lifeline. And now the fantasy was

horribly, undeniably real. The news had been delivered in a flat, monotone voice, and the world hadn't ended. The clocks still ticked. But he was dead. Gone. And she liked it.

The world fell silent around her; the air was not spiky on her hand. The circle brought back so many memories that she couldn't help but smile lopsidedly.

"Now, we gather to bid farewell to one of our own," Maks announced, arms spread wide. "Though special, Ben served the Lord with devotion. His loss wounds us all. The Lord has claimed him, but his spirit remains within our hearts," he said, hand pressed to his chest. Beside him, a frowning Karina gulped down her smirk.

And Greta? She despised how her pulse still quickened at the memory of his touch, how her mind replayed the weight of his hands, and the way he'd leave her skin marred with blossoms of purple and red, as though branding her with his poison. Every scar itched like a beckoning finger; every bruise throbbed with a perverse affection. She craved the familiarity of his rage, the sickening dance of fear that left her both shattered and alive. Even now, she imagined his breath on her neck, the way he'd whisper her name like a threat. Greta knew she should burn his voice from her mind, yet she clung to it like a lifeline. She hated him. She hated herself more. So why did his absence feel like a void?

"We acknowledge his crossing," he says, pauses, and meets Greta's gaze while she stands there, frozen. "And we thank you. Thank you for caring for Lis despite her troubles. How selfless. Your devotion will always outshine us all."

Greta wanted to vomit.

"May his name be etched in the tombs of the damned, forever bound to the power he now serves; may the light guide him."

Maks stepped in between them; his touch was a feather-light blessing on their shoulders—met with murmured repetitions that echoed like sacred chants. His hand subtly nudged them towards the oddly rounded daisy field—more of a patch—where in the middle, specks of dust seemed to dance like flies. Gratitude, thoughts, and prayers oozed from their lips—warm memories, hugs and joyful words.

“Blessed be the sun,” says Maks at last.

He watched, a grim stillness settling over the scene. He lowered the stones, one by one, onto Ben’s closed eyes. Maks moved with a heartbreaking elegance. He knelt beside his son, a figure offering a final tribute. With steady hands, he placed two dead dandelions, frail and withered at the edges, past their prime, onto the cold, unmoving stones.

"Blessed be the sun," repeated someone else. Greta couldn’t care enough to turn around, her mind so far gone that it seemed almost like a play.

Still, she nodded, a smile stretching thinly across her face, masking the calculation beneath.

In the flickering gloom, Greta watched as Maks hauled forward a bowl brimming with honey.

He paused, eyes lingering on the golden viscous offering, and whispered, “Let the Dark Lord claim him.” A strained grin forced its way across his face—an artificial mask that made Greta’s stomach churn, though she no longer felt the old pang of unease. The sweet, cloying scent of the honey rose in a thick cloud as Maks cradled the bowl, the gesture oddly paternal.

Greta looked over at the lifeless form of Ben, and watched the older man’s steady hands spread the honey across his pallid torso, each careful stroke a ritualistic anointment. For a heartbeat, Maks faltered, his gaze snagging on Greta’s steady hand reaching toward her own eyes, as if she might erase the horror she witnessed.

Instead, Greta’s fingers closed around a single pearl that dangled from her bracelet, the bead a mute talisman against the darkness as Maks traced a sigil into Ben’s forehead.

“Bless the weak with the agony their souls crave; may their wounds grant them power and deliver them from this wretched illness. Accept their sacrifice; absolve her of her sins. May the Lord find you, son,” murmured Maks, before brushing a stray lock from the body’s face. “In the name of the Sun, the Father, and the Dark Lord—grant Ben farewell, shield him from impurity, and teach us strength. Amen.” The air grew heavy with incense and honey, sealing the grim benediction with a darkness that seemed to pulse from the very walls.

Maks barely managed to lift his torso from the cold floor when Greta's hand clamped around his wrist, yanking him upright with a sudden, desperate urgency. "I'm sorry," she whispers, her voice trembling against the silence, against the burning gazes.

For a heartbeat he meets her gaze, his brow furrowing as a flicker of melancholy passes through his eyes. He presses his free hand over hers, the contact a fragile shield against the tide of guilt that threatens to drown them both. "You should never have to apologize, Greta," he murmurs, his tone low and unyielding, as if reciting a grim prayer. "Do you understand? It isn't my place to bear this burden. He's with your parents now—he's with the Lord."

The weight of the moment pressed down like fog over the riverbank as Maks lifted Ben's lifeless body with effort, each step toward the water's edge heavy with unspoken grief.

The float bobbed gently in the black current, waiting. Greta stood frozen behind an oak, her back pressed into its bark as if the tree could shield her from what was happening—or from herself.

Her breath came shallow, eyes locked on the surface of the water: not on Ben, not on the makeshift raft, but on the dark mirror below, where memories spiraled like roots beneath the surface.

She remembered the cold slime of algae wrapping around her ankle and the way a lily pad slithered across her throat like a wet hand. The river had tried to eat her long before it finally took him.

Maks turned to her. The shadows made his face look hard, like carved wood. "Do you want to push him in?" he whispered. The trees seemed to lean in to hear his voice.

Greta waited. Then, she barely breathed the word: "No."

He studied her, a flicker of question in his gaze, but said nothing. There was no point in pushing. Some wounds refused closure.

Then a hand settled on his shoulder—steady, grounding. Henrik stepped forward, dead silent, and knelt at the water's edge. With a quiet strength, he pressed the float forward. The current caught it at once, tugging

Ben gently into the darkening river, carrying him away beneath a sky bruised with twilight. No words. No prayers. Just the whisper of water folding over loss, and three figures standing where land met the abyss, each drowning in their own way.

The water below was a slick canvas, hissing and frothing against the dark rocks. From behind, a warmth, startling in the chill air, closed over Greta's hand. She didn't have to look to know it was Karina. "Are you ok?"

The question was a soft murmur, but Greta heard it as if it were shouted. Her gaze remained fixed on the churning blackness. The familiar, cool weight of her bracelet was her only anchor, a shield against the emptiness before her. Her knuckles turned white as her fingers clenched, her fingernail gouging a thin line into the etched metal centerpiece.

For a long moment, the only answer was the wind tugging at her hair and the distant, hungry roar of the waves. Each second that passed was thin and loud, pulling her closer to the edge of something unspeakable. Finally, she tore her eyes from the abyss and looked at Karina, whose face was covered in a frown that nearly reached down to her cheeks.

"I think so," Greta managed, her voice a hoarse whisper. Then, turning the question back like a weapon, "Are you?" The question was stupid. Karina never liked Ben.

"It's stupid," she muttered, more to the gnarled trees than the girl beside her. "I shouldn't be sad. I should be happy he's dead."

Greta laughed. This time it did not sound wrong.

Karina didn't flinch. Her pale eyes, hollow as tombstones, flicked to Greta. She was laughing, too. "Well," she said slowly, "David told me something you're going to find stupid. Do you still want to hear it?"

Greta rolled her eyes, but the motions felt like cracking ice. "Of course," she sneered, though her voice wavered.

"When people die," Karina began, leaning in enough for her breath to mist between them, "a part of you

dies too. If you loved them, that part hollows out—a void, numb as a grave. But if you hated them…" She paused, her smile sharp as a blade. "That part burns. It eats you from the inside, a slow rot, until your charred remains whisper 'it's not your fault' to the wind. But it is your fault. Isn't it?"

Greta's lip curled, a grotesque twist of distaste that stretched too far, too sharp—into a smile.

"The dead don't stay dead for those who loved them. But for those who hated… they linger."

"Fantastic," snorted Greta, her scoffing more of a laugh. Finally, she laughed. "The worst thing for me is that I miss him. Not like Pappa, but still, I miss him."

The air hung thick and still as Greta and Karina approached the gnarled tree line, their hands dipping into the duffel to pull out rolls of silver crepe tape—funeral tape, meant for marking sacred ground. One by one, they spiraled the metallic strips around bark, the ribbons catching moonlight like exposed nerves.

"He doesn't deserve it," Karina's voice low and venomous, her fingers trembling not with grief, but rage.

"The crepe tapes?" Greta asked, cautious.

Karina let out a hollow laugh that echoed too long between the trees. "All of this. The ceremony. The mourners were gathering like he was someone. Like he ever mattered."

The wind stilled. No birds. No breath. Just the trees, wrapped now in silver sutures, as if binding a wound that should've been left open to rot.

Brunost emerged from the shadows of the treeline—a streak of matted fur and glowing eyes—his usual gait replaced by a skittering lope, as though something behind her had snapped the leash of the world.

Greta caught him, the cat's trembling body clutched tight against her chest, claws pricking through fabric like tiny needles of warning. A low, guttural purr rumbled, not of comfort, but of something deeper, older—words half-formed beneath the skin.

Without looking away from the darkened woods, Greta murmured over her shoulder, "Tea, Karina?" The offer hung in the air, too casual, too hollow. There would be no warmth in the cup tonight—only the slow, creeping dread that something was missing.

“Tea?” she offered, voice thin with forced cheer.

Karina didn’t blink. Her smile was a knife-slash in the dimming light. “No,” she said, the word cold and final. “I have something better.”

Before Greta could react, Karina seized her wrist—skin clammy, grip iron—and yanked her toward the sagging barn. The door groaned open, exhaling a breath of damp hay and something fouler beneath.

The air in the barn reeked of damp wool and decay. It was surprising that Karina declined the tea, especially with her voice sharp as a blade’s edge. But as she yanked Greta inside, the door slammed shut, she couldn’t help but frown. Greta’s breath hitched. “What are you doing?”

In the center, a crude circle of milky eyes stared upward, jaws unhinged in silent screams. Karina stepped over a twitching goat, its throat stitched shut with coarse black thread. “You’ll see,” she whispered, dragging Greta deeper. “It’s so much tastier than tea.”

“What?”

Karina’s lips curl into a hiss. “Payback,”

She rifled through the cupboards, fingers brushing jars of pickled organs, until she emerged triumphantly with a glass container. Inside, something pulsed—a heart? An eye?—swimming in murky liquid.

The glass veil was cold and hollow in Greta’s hands. Karina’s smile didn’t reach her eyes, which glittered with a feverish light.

“It’s your turn now,” she whispered, voice like rustling leaves. “To keep him. Make him regret.”

Greta’s own voice was a rasp. “How?”

Karina’s grin was a slash of white in the dimness. “He loved grasshoppers, didn’t he?”

Before Greta could react, Karina yanked her into the creeping dusk, her grip like iron. In one fluid, merciless motion, she snatched a grasshopper from a stem, popping its legs with a series of sickeningly delicate cracks. She dropped the twitching, broken thing into the jar.

Greta didn’t pull away; just watched as a familiar hunger began to bloom in her chest.

Greta stared at the dead grasshopper, its legs twisted against the glass. Her fingertip traced the cold surface, a shiver crawling up her spine. "What now? Do I need something from Ben to—"

"Oh, no," Karina shook her head, snatching the vial and pressing it into Greta's palm. Her fingers closed around Greta's like a vine. "You keep it."

Greta recoiled. "And do what? Keep it under my pillow? Turn it into some kind of twisted talisman?"

"No," whispered Karina, eyes glinting in the dim light. "Keep him like he kept you. Preserved. Powerless. A little dead thing in a jar to remind you—he can't crawl into your ears anymore. He can't whisper. He can't hurt you."

Karina's smile curved like a blade as she brushed Greta's shoulder, her voice a serrated whisper. "Put him in the cage, Greta. You've earned it."

Greta's gaze lingered on the thing in Karina's palm—a grasshopper, its emerald exoskeleton twisted, eyes like cracked amber. She snorted, a cold glint sharpening her smirk. "Powerless," she spat.

"Yeah," Karina breathed, "powerless." She nudged Greta, the night air thick with the reek of damp earth. "Your nightstand. Now."

Greta's laugh slithered through the shadows as she crouched, outstretched hands aching for the creature.

Karina dropped it into her grip, murmuring, "Blessed be the sun."

"Blessed be," Greta hissed, already sprinting toward the farmhouse's rotting porch, the grasshopper's twitching legs clawing at her skin.

Back in the farmhouse, Greta scrambled up the stairs in a hurried, clawing ascent as the wooden treads seemed to soften and buckle beneath her feet, threatening to send her tumbling back into the dark.

She didn't dare look down. As she plunged onto the second-floor landing, her breath froze in her throat. A sound had followed her—not a footstep, but a slow, wet scrape from the floor below. She whirled around, but the hallway behind her was a throat of impenetrable black. The only light came from a single lamp at the far end, right beside her bedroom door. It sputtered, its sickly yellow light casting long, skeletal shadows that

danced like puppets on the walls. With a final, electrical gasp, it extinguished.

Greta was plunged into a deeper, more profound darkness. She forced herself forward, each footfall landing on a carpet that felt less like fiber and more like dried, crumbling skin. The doorknob was a shadow away, but the space between her and the door now felt like a kilometer, gaping and hungry with whatever was climbing the stairs behind her.

She wrenched it open, slipped inside, and slammed the door shut behind her with a force that rattled the frame. The lock clicked—not from her hand, but as if something else in the room had engaged it first. Her breath shallow, she pressed her back against the wood, as though holding it closed might keep it out. Or maybe keep her in.

Clutched to her chest was a mason jar, its glass smeared with grime, sealed tight with a rusted lid. Inside, the grasshopper did not decompose. Its exoskeleton gleamed unnaturally, too black, too glossy—like polished onyx. Greta smiled. It had died. This wasn't a trophy. It was a promise. It was her freedom. Freedom in a jar.

The jar grew warmer in her hands, vibrating faintly, as if something inside were waking up. Or something was crawling out. Greta's smile widened. She hadn't collected the grasshopper. She *caught* it. All by herself.

She placed the jar on her nightstand, its glass slick with something that gleamed like oil—or blood. Inside, the grasshopper's legs twitched sporadically.

She perched cross-legged on the bed, her grin a jagged rift in her face, teeth glinting with an unnatural sheen. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice a broken melody, hands pressed together like a supplicant's, fingers trembling. "Thank you so much." The words dripped from her, unhinged, as the shadows in the corner of the room seemed to shift, coiling like living things. The grasshopper's glassy eyes reflected her fevered gaze—a final, terrified mirror to the madness in hers.

The knock came without warning—three sharp raps against the door, like bone on wood—and Greta's breath hitched, her fingers tightening around the glass jar on her lap. Inside, something pulsed faintly, a slow, wet throb beneath the cloudy surface.

The door creaked open, and Simon stepped through, his silhouette tall and too still against the dim hall light. His eyes flickered to the jar, narrowing for half a second—just long enough for her to wonder if he knew—but then he looked away, dismissing it like a bad dream.

"You're happy," Simon said, his voice smooth, almost amused, as he drifted deeper into the room. His footsteps made no sound. He stopped beside the closet, one hand resting on the door, the wood groaning under his touch.

"I'm not sad," Greta replied, her voice quiet, her gaze fixed on him. On the small, frayed rope burns around his wrists. On the way his shadow didn't quite match his movements. "I'm happy he died."

Simon tilted his head. Then he laughed—low, hollow, like wind through a corpse's teeth. "Oh yeah. I see it, *happyface*. So am I. I was never a fan of him."

And in the silence that followed, the jar began to tick, like a heart remembering how to beat.

Greta's breath hitched as her eyes fixed on the grasshopper—its carapace ashen, legs curled lifelessly. But it was the thing's eyes that froze her. One moment, they were glassy and vacant, the next—no. They blazed white, no pupils, no indication of a creature that belonged to the natural order.

When she turned back, the grasshopper's lid had stitched shut, its form a mangled husk once more. But the sickening lie lingered: something beneath the dirt was watching. Waiting. And it knew she had seen the truth in those blazing, dead eyes.

The whisper of the cardboard box was the only sound in the stale air. Simon placed the deck of cards on the threadbare quilt between them, the corners soft and dark with a greasy patina. "A round of Gris?" His voice was a flat, unfamiliar thing.

Greta's nod was barely a tremor. Her leg slid over the other, the motion painfully deliberate, a sin performed in slow motion. Every fiber of her being screamed that this was forbidden, an old commandment burned so deeply into her soul that the scars had outlasted the memory of the branding.

But she knew the truth now. The Lord would not come from a bruised-purple sky just for the transgression of crossed limbs. He hadn't come even then, in the mud and the stink, when she had cradled the piglet to her chest, its heartbeat a tiny drum against her own. And he wouldn't come now.

The House that Jack Built

Chapter 11 : Elias

The crown is not gold, but the absence of chains. Rule not men, but the void within them. — Lukas7:10

He woke up scratching a bump on his arm. By noon, it had spread into a line of red dots crawling up to his shoulder. In front of the mirror, he froze; the bumps were moving. Shifting under his skin. Like something tunneling. Digging. He dug his nails in, desperate to tear it out. A thin crack opened—enough for something pale to press against the surface. It wasn't trying to get out.

Elias's breath hitched as he plunged his nails into his own flesh. He expected the wet pop of an exoskeleton but was met instead with a sickening tear. He looked down. No horror, only a slick, hot tide of crimson welling from the furrows his nails had carved.

A choked groan escaped him; he squeezed his eyes shut, a denial of the reality slicking his fingers. When he dared to look again, the blood was gone—not wiped away, but vanished, as if it had never existed. The deep

gouges in his arm were sealed, leaving only unblemished skin, and the phantom itch had retreated into the silence.

Elias sat on the edge of the bed, his heart a moth's wing against his ribs. He raised a hand—the same hand that had been steeped in his own blood moments before—and ran it calmly through his hair.

The doorframe splintered before Jasper's shoulder. He burst into the room, his breath catching in his throat. The air was thick, heavy with the coppery tang of blood and something else, something acrid. His eyes, adjusting to the gloom, found Elias slumped against the bedframe, a puppet with its strings cut.

But it was his arms that Jasper couldn't stop staring at. They were slick and black in the low light. Dark blood leaked from a dozen neat, straight cuts, weeping down his skin like oil. The blood didn't just sit there; it pulsed with every heartbeat, dripping onto the floor as if it were feeding the wood.

Elias lifted his head just enough for the light to hit his face. His lips were dry and split, his eyes empty like glass. He raised one shaking hand to tell Jasper to stop, but he looked like a man begging for his life.

"It's nothing," he rasped.

The words were a dry rasp, a lie so thin, a pathetic attempt to curtain the abyss that had opened in his own flesh.

Jasper took a halting step forward, his own voice a low growl, laced with a terror that went far deeper than the sight of blood. It was the terror of a clock with no hands.

"It doesn't look like nothing." He could feel the precious seconds slipping away. "It looks like the price. And it looks like we're about to run out of time to pay for it."

With a sound like tearing fabric, Elias peeled himself away from the wall, motionless for an unnerving length of time. His spine realigned with a series of sickening clicks, each one a tiny hammer blow in the silence of the room. He shrugged, a gesture that seemed too loose, too disjointed for a human frame, and glided closer to Jasper.

“It’s nothing.” He breathed the words, but his gaze was fixed, unblinking, on Jasper’s.

His uncle gave a slow nod, his face a mask of quiet emptiness. “It’s nothing,” he echoed, his voice flat and devoid of life. It was a statement of fact, an erasure of whatever had just occurred.

Then his eyes, previously dark and calm, seemed to swallow the light, the pupils dilating into perfect black voids that promised not anger, but something far, far worse. “But don’t do it again.”

It.

Elias knew exactly what he meant. The taste—copper and salt—flooded his tongue. A memory he tried to keep locked away in the deepest part of his mind rattled its cage: the satisfying crack of something giving way, a whisper that wasn't his own coiled in his ear. And it would have been easier, so much easier, if Jasper had let the moment pass, allowing it to dissolve back into the unsaid. But the name had been spoken, the spell broken.

Still, Elias gave another jerky nod and turned, his fingers fumbling for a sweater thrown over a chair. He pulled the coarse wool over his head and turned around to face him.

He didn’t turn when he spoke.

“You know why I do it,” he said, voice low, frayed at the edges.

Jaspar sat on the edge of the bed, fingers curled into the frayed fabric of his jeans. He looked up, his eyes catching the pale light—wide, tired, too knowing. “I know,” he murmured, the words soft, almost tender. A dangerous kind of softness. “But what’s the use if it hurts you and doesn’t change anything? You can’t beat yourself up like this forever.”

A dry click escaped Elias’s throat—a sound like a bone snapping back into place. “Ironic,” he said.

Jaspar frowned. “What is?”

“How you worded it.” Elias finally turned, and his smile was a wound. “Beat yourself up.” His voice dropped, sharpened. “You think that’s all I’m doing? Just… punishing myself?” He took a slow step forward, and the floorboard groaned beneath him like a dying thing. “It’s not punishment. It’s maintenance.”

Jaspar's breath hitched. "Elias—"

"If I stop," Elias went on, ignoring him, "if I let myself forget even for a second... then it wakes up." His fingers twitched at his sides, nails dark with grime—or was it dried blood? "It lives in guilt. Feeds on it. The shame, the regret—they keep it quiet. Tethered, like the freaks say. But the moment I forgive myself..." He leaned in, close enough that Jaspar could smell the metallic tang on his breath, and could see the faint tremor in his jaw. "The moment I stop hurting... it starts moving again."

Jaspar swallowed hard. He remembered the scratches on the inside of the closet door. The voice that wasn't Elias's, whispering from the bathroom mirror at 3 a.m. The way Elias would wake up screaming, his own hands wrapped around his throat.

Jaspar's voice was a whisper. "Hurting yourself hasn't helped so far. Why would it now?"

Elias's smile didn't reach his eyes. "I'm not hurting myself," he said. "I'm feeding the cage." He reached up slowly, pressed a palm to his chest—right over his heart—and for a heartbeat, Elias heard Jaspar say he saw something shift beneath the skin, a ripple like a worm beneath glass. "As long as it's full," Elias murmured, "it stays quiet."

The grip was a manacle of ice, locking around Elias's wrist as his fingers brushed the warped wood of the door. It wasn't a desperate grab; it was a seizure, a claim. Elias stopped, his entire body going rigid. He didn't turn. He couldn't bear to see the look on Jaspar's face—the terror, or worse, the understanding.

"Don't," Jaspar breathed, his voice a raw scrape in the stagnant air. The room let out a low, greasy hum that made their skin crawl. Everything smelled like a fresh grave after a lightning strike—wet dirt and burnt air. "Elias, we are so close."

Elias's head tilted, a gesture that seemed both alien and broken. A sound came from him, a dry rustle like dead leaves skittering across pavement. "Close," he echoed, the word devoid of hope, filled only with dreadful certainty. "It's waiting, Jaspar. It's been listening. Don't force me to stop now."

He didn't yank his arm free. He didn't struggle. He simply took another step forward. Jaspar's face twisted

into a grimace as the solid bone and flesh of Elias's wrist dissolved into a slick, frigid static beneath his fingers.

His fingers closed on nothing. Elias stepped over the threshold without a backward glance, his silhouette swallowed by an impossible color that bled into the hallway.

One step in, and his mind drifted to Ada. Would she say anything? Tell anyone? Elias could see it in Ada, a stillness that wasn't peace but a horrifying, vacant obedience. She was a marionette whose strings had been cut and then crudely knotted back together by a clumsy, malevolent hand, her own will, a prisoner behind the glass of her eyes. He knew she was aware, on some level, that something foreign had sunk its hooks into her mind. But the terror of it had sealed her lips, cementing her silence.

He thought about how easy it was to ruin the innocent. Their souls were like soft wet clay, ready to be squeezed into any shape he wanted. But the broken ones—those were the real work. Trauma was like a bad weld, fusing a soul into something jagged and stubborn. They were harder to break, but that just made the breaking more fun. And once they finally snapped, they were yours forever.

"You heard about Esja?" Jaspar's voice was a low murmur in the silence.

Elias kept walking, his own footsteps sharp and echoing in protest. "The kitchen girl? What about her?"

"She's gone," Jaspar said, the words hanging in the air. "Dead. One night she was on roster, the next... an empty bed. People say she left, but her things are still there." A slight hesitation, thick with unspoken dread. "She and Greta were close. Inseparable."

Elias finally stopped, turning to face him. The dim fluorescent lights carved his features into sharp, cruel relief. A huff of cold air that might have been a laugh escaped his lips. "Greta? Is that why she's been walking around like a ghost?"

"Maybe," Jaspar whispered, his gaze flickering toward the far-end of the hall, where Greta's door was always shut.

The thought seemed to please Elias. A thin, predatory smirk stretched his mouth, an expression that held no warmth, only a sudden, terrible clarity. He saw it now—not a tragedy, but a tool. Greta's grief, her strange silence, was a vulnerability. The crack in the armor Elias didn't know was possible.

"Yes," he breathed, his eyes gleaming. "Maybe that's helpful." He looked down the hall, not at Greta's door, but as if he could see right through it, to the broken thing waiting inside. He grabbed Jaspar's shoulder, squeezing it. "Thank you."

Elias crept down the stairs, his footsteps muffled and heavy. He stepped into the living room, where the shadows seemed to shift and stretch to meet him.

The air in the living room was thick, like something invisible had settled between the walls, watching.

Elias stared at Greta. Her hands were busy before her. It was an odd kind of silence. Just that dull, waiting quiet that comes before something breaks.

Elias didn't want to look at the kitchen. But his eyes pulled toward it anyway. The fridge stood in the corner, dented and humming low, like it was alive and dreaming. Magnets clung to its front—the usual: a grocery list in Greta''s messy scrawl, a faded photo of her and one of the dogs last summer, and a cartoon dinosaur that had lost one eye. Nothing strange. Nothing out of place.

Except the air in front of the fridge was shimmering. Like heat rising off pavement. Elias blinked, but it didn't go away. It pulsed.

Then the magnets began to tremble.

Not rattle—tremble, like something was shaking them from the inside. The photo lifted first, peeling slowly off the metal, floating for a second in the air before slapping face-down on the counter. The list tore free and spun in a slow circle, as if caught in a private wind. The dinosaur magnet twisted, then shot sideways, embedding itself in the wall like it had been thrown.

Greta didn't move. Her breath stuck in her throat. She didn't scream. Just stood there..

The fridge door bulged.

Slightly. Like something inside was pressing against it from the dark.

Then—click. The seal broke.

The door swung open an inch. Then stopped.

Inside, the light was off. But the fridge wasn't empty. Something was standing there. Not a shape, not really—a stretch of deeper black, a gap in the world. And it was looking back at her.

She backed up. One step. Then another. The dinosaur magnet. The one from the fridge. It was on the floor now, face up, its one glass eye staring at her. Elias watched her pick it up and put it on the counter. Then she left the kitchen without another word, cursing Satan under her breath, trying to keep up with her legs.

Elias stepped into the kitchen next, his eyes searching for the magnet. But it wasn't broken anymore.

The missing eye had grown back.

Black. Wet. Blinking.

Upstairs, a door slammed shut. Then laughter. High. Giggling. But not happy. Never happy.

It was the kind of laugh that made your spine freeze. The kind that didn't belong to anyone human. And from deep below, beneath the floorboards, beneath the foundation, something answered.

Elias turned to Jasper, his brows furrowed. They both knew. The magnets. They didn't fall. They were let go.

They stood by the fridge, voices hushed but insistent, as if volume could contain the horror they were trying to name. Greta's name slipped between them like a knife through fabric.

"It had to be her," muttered Elias, staring at the scattered magnets littering the hardwood—letters rearranged into patterns no one wanted to read. The R upside down. The U cracked like a skull split down the middle. And the N beneath. Still.

No one admitted what the word spelled. No one had to. They stared, as if the magnets might shift again,

might spell something worse, something final. The silence that followed wasn't empty. It pulsed beneath the floorboards, as though the house itself was listening, waiting to correct a mistake.

Elias stepped away first, his boots sticking slightly on the tacky tile. He turned, brushing his shoulder against the heavy wooden column that separated the kitchen from the narrow hallway. Dust and splinters peeled under his touch.

And then he saw it—leaning against the wall, half-hidden behind a coil of frayed wire—the nail gun. It was old, its black casing scuffed and stained with something dark that wasn't oil. The trigger guard was bent inward, like it had been crushed and pried open again.

Elias froze. His breath caught, not in fear exactly, but in recognition—deep, real. He knew that tool. Not from farms. Not from repairs. He'd seen it before in a context that didn't belong here, somewhere he couldn't quite reach. A flash: blood on chrome, the sharp thwack of metal driving into something soft. He couldn't place it. The memory slipped through his mind like smoke.

"Jaspar," he said, voice low, cracked. "Look."

Jaspar followed his gaze, then shrugged, his expression slack, indifferent. "It's a nail gun. What about it?"

"It's... it's not supposed to be here," Elias whispered. His fingers twitched at his sides. He wanted to pick it up, to confirm the weight, the coldness of the metal. But he didn't. Something in him recoiled. "I've seen this one before."

Jaspar barked a laugh—short, hollow. "You've seen a hundred of 'em. We're on a farm, Elias. Wood splits. Fences fall. Things break. You nail 'em back together. That's life out here." He turned, already walking toward the back door. "Come on. David said to meet him outside."

Elias didn't move. He stared at the nail gun. The silence thickened. The hum beneath the floorboards rose a half-step, like a distant transformer about to blow. Then, with a shudder, he followed.

Outside, the air smelled of manure, wet earth, and faintly coppery. Pigs grunted behind the wooden fence, their snouts digging at the mud, rooting for scraps. And there, in the middle of the pen, stood David. Calm.

Methodical. He held a white plastic bucket in one hand, and from it, he pulled chunks wrapped in burlap. He didn't hesitate. One by one, he tossed them into the pen. The pigs surged, squealing, tearing at the packages with their teeth, ripping the fabric open. Mud splattered. Bones cracked.

Elias stopped dead. His stomach twisted. "What... what is that?"

Jaspar didn't answer. He watched, expressionless, as David reached into his coat and pulled out another bundle. This one is smaller. Wrapped tighter. The burlap slipped as it landed, and for a split second, something pale and curved tumbled free—one hand, fingers curled like a sleeping infant's. The pinky finger was missing.

Elias staggered back. "Ben," he breathed. Not a question. A confirmation. He glanced back to the river, where his body floated earlier. But he wasn't there anymore. Someone had taken him out.

David looked up. His face was blank. "Oh hey, didn't see you there." he said simply.

And suddenly it made sense. The magnets weren't dropped. They were arranged. A message. A warning. Greta hadn't dropped them—she'd left them. Before they took her. Before they silenced her too.

David finally looked at him. His eyes were dark, too deep. "We all do what we have to," he said softly. "The farm feeds us. But it has to be fed too."

Elias didn't back away, he went forward, his boots sinking into the mud. The pigs were still eating. One lifted its snout, red with blood, and stared at him with black, unblinking eyes. For a moment, Elias thought it smiled.

Then the humming started again—not from the house, but from the ground. A vibration, deep and rhythmic. The nail gun, still inside, began to rattle against the wall. The magnets on the kitchen floor shifted, sliding slowly, rearranging themselves into a new word.

Outside, David picked up the empty bucket, turned it over, and let the last scrap fall—a tuft of dark hair, knotted with dried blood.

He watched Elias. "You'll understand soon," he said. "When it's your turn to feed the pigs."

Elias hugged his arms, a useless shield against the cloying damp of the night. "I'm not really a mud-and-dirt person," he said, his voice firm.

David didn't smile. He nudged the heavy canvas pants with his boot. "It's not the mud you need to worry about," he rasped, staring into the writhing shadows between the trees. "It's the things that live in it. They're drawn to warmth, to any dark, quiet place they can find."

A phantom itch crawled up Elias's spine as he pictured his own ears. "I've never done that kind of harvesting. Cranberries aren't my domain."

"I know," David said, his eyes glinting in the gloom. "That's what makes you so ripe."

David's laughter scraped the air—too sharp, too long—like bones dragging across stone. "It's a joke," he said, slapping Elias's shoulder.

But his hand didn't leave. It lingered, fingers pressing in enough to make Elias flinch, warm and heavy like a rotting weight. The smile on David's face didn't reach his eyes; they stayed flat, dark, unblinking.

The silence stretched, thick and sour, until Elias could feel the pulse in his neck throb beneath that still, clinging hand. It wasn't friendly. It wasn't normal. And when David finally pulled away, his palm left a phantom chill, as if something inside Elias had stirred—but not in disgust.

Elias leaned forward, his eyes narrowing into slits. "You people have the worst humor," he said, voice low, crawling like something dragged through dirt.

David smiled—too wide, too pretty. A flower splitting dry earth.

"I know," he said, chuckling, though the sound didn't reach his eyes. "It... grows on you. Like mold. Comes with living here."

The first tremor was a tickle of needles against his skin. He glanced down, and the thing was already there, a fragment of obsidian crawling over the back of his hand, its legs like glass. Instinct, primal and swift, took over. He clenched his other hand into a fist and brought it down. The clap of his palms was a final, a sound he expected to be followed by the familiar, pulpy crush. Instead, there was only a dry, abrasive hiss, like sand

skittering across stone.

Slowly, hesitantly, he opened his hands. They were empty. Or, not quite empty.

Coating his lifelines and the creases of his knuckles was a fine, grey powder, like ash or the dust from a forgotten tomb. It swirled in the dim light, a ghost of the thing he'd destroyed. There was no stain, no shred of chitin, and no trace of a creature ever having existed.

A cold dread, far worse than any spider's bite, began to coil in his gut. He hadn't killed anything. He had simply... erased it. And now, on his skin, he could feel the lingering chill of something that was never truly alive.

Elias stared at his hand, the remains of the spider crumpled beneath his thumb, its legs twitching like fractured whispers. He didn't flinch.

"You saw that, right?" Elias asked, voice smooth as a blade sheathed in velvet. The question hung, weighted, as if the walls themselves might answer.

David tilted his head. "Saw what?"

"The spider." Elias let the syllables drag, let the lie coil between them. He could see the gears turning behind David's glassy stare, the way his fingers twitched at his sides, a caged thing scrabbling at bars. Good, Elias thought. Let him squirm.

David's laugh was a dry rasp. "Thought you were used to spiders." His gaze flicked to the corner where a web sagged, trembling, as though the creature within still breathed. "Ain't they... your thing?"

Elias stepped closer, until the basement's dim light licked the scarred ridge of David's jaw. "You remember the last one," he murmured. The words were a needle, and David's pupils fluttered—there—a crack in the mask.

Memories bloomed in that silence. A smaller room. A younger man, thrashing as eight legs skittered over his skin, boring into his dreams. Elias had whispered then, too. His voice promised to make everything go away, to just let go and sink into the dark. David had prayed, then. Now, he only smiled.

“Maybe I’ve developed a tolerance,” David said, too casually.

Elias’s thumb brushed the spider’s corpse, scattering it into dust. “Tolerance,” he echoed. “Or maybe you’re just getting used to it.” He let his hand drop, the sound of a clock going backwards, the pointer stuck—click, click, click.

“You think I don’t know,” David’s hiss was too quiet. “You think I don’t see.”

Elias leaned in until their breath mingled. “That’s the joke,” he said. “You don’t. Not yet.”

He turned, leaving David to the shadows and the thing in the wall that was still watching, still waiting. Power wasn’t in the crushing, Elias knew—it was in the choice of when to let the creature live.

Elias’s breath caught when he glanced away from David—a fleeting moment of distraction that turned his gaze toward the woods. There, silhouetted against the dying light, loomed a figure of gnarled sticks and splintered bone, its body a grotesque lattice of thorns and hollows. It rose higher than the hills, a skeletal anomaly swaying as though testing the air, its many joints creaking like dead branches in a storm. Elias stumbled backward, his pulse pacing. He couldn’t explain it, couldn’t form the words for what he’d seen, but his body knew: Leave. Now.

He barked for Jasper in the living room, his voice sharper than he intended. Jasper looked up from the old armchair, eyes narrowing at the sweat on Elias’s brow, the tremor in his hands.

“What is it?” Jasper asked, but Elias only grabbed his wrist, tight, urgent.

“Trust me,” he hissed.

They slipped through the barn doors and into the dusk, the cornfield stretching before them in a sea of jagged teeth. The stalks hissed as they passed, though the wind had long since died.

The path was familiar yet wrong—the rows had been rearranged, twisted into patterns that spiraled toward the field’s heart. And there, nestled in the earth like a shrine, was the table: a white fabric covered the wood, one candle in the middle, its fire long gone. It looked like something from a farmhouse picnic, abandoned for years. But this wasn’t a picnic ground.

Around it, the corn stood unnaturally still, untouched by harvest, as though the ground refused to yield its secrets. Beneath the table, half-buried in soil, lay remnants—rusting nails, torn shreds of cloth, a child's doll with one glass eye staring upward.

Elias's boots crunched over something hard. A cross, crude and splintered, stuck partway into the mud. Jasper knelt, brushing dirt from its base, and froze. The cross wasn't wood—it was bone, carved with a girl's name, Dagmar, and a date that had long passed. Nearby, a path of charred corn stalks led in a straight line to the road, as if guiding something... or someone.

"This isn't right," Jasper muttered, voice thin. But Elias was already moving, drawn to the table's shadow. On its surface lay a scattering of objects: a rusted knife, a leather-bound book splayed open to a page of jagged symbols, and a bundle of herbs that reeked of rot. Behind them, the corn shifted again—a slow, deliberate rustle, like a throat clearing.

Then they heard it: a low, grating sound, as though the trolls in the woods had turned its head.

Jasper grabbed Elias's arm. "We need to go."

But Elias was transfixed, his eyes locked on the table's base, where fresh soil had been disturbed. He pried at the earth, fingers clawing until his nails split, until he uncovered the edge of a hand—pale, slender, wearing a silver ring he recognized. Around Ben's neck. And Greta's too. Like a family heirloom.

The corn behind them bent, folding into a path. A presence pressed against their backs, vast and cold. Jasper didn't look back. He didn't need to. The air tasted of iron, and the ground hummed with something hungry. They stalked, boots swallowing the dirt as the stalks closed in behind them, and the stick man's laugh echoed over the hills—a sound made of breaking branches and the slow, wet crack of bones.

When Elias glanced away, the world held its breath. A low, splintering creak echoes behind him—a sound like bones cracking in the dark. He turns. There it stands: a colossal stick monster, its jagged frame twisted from ancient, blackened branches, towering over the hills like a crooked monument to forgotten terrors. Its limbs sprawl like skeletal fingers, scraping the sky, while its hollow eyes—glowing faintly with a sickly amber

light—fix on Elias. The air chokes with the smell of damp rot, and the ground trembles as it shifts, each step a thunderous landslide of twigs and earth. Birds vanish. Wind dies. Even the shadows recoil.

Elias freezes. It knows he's there. And Elias sees. He sees it. They lock eyes. Like a silent understanding. And the Stick Man turns, its limbs merging with the corn.

And then there was the trail. Not a path—trails are made by feet. This was carved. Too straight. Too deliberate. It cut through the corn like a scar, leading all the way to the broken asphalt of the old county road. No cars ever came here. No one even remembered this road was here. But the trail knew.

They followed it. Not because they wanted to. But because stopping felt worse.

When they reached the edge, they stopped. Just stood there. Stared. The road stretched empty in both directions, vanishing into the gray haze of the horizon. It looked normal. Too normal. Like a photograph slipped out of time.

One of them took a step forward. Then froze.

Because from the corner of their eye—deep in the corn—they saw it.

The table was gone.

But the cross remained.

And now, it wasn't alone.

Figures stood around it—tall, thin, their limbs too long, swaying slightly as if rustling with the wind. They weren't human. Not anymore. Their faces were blurred, like smudged photographs, but their eyes—oh, their eyes—were wide open, white, and staring straight at the road.

At them.

With a hand too steady in the cold, he ripped a strip of colorful tape from the tree. The sound was a violent tear in the stillness. He then pulled a crumpled piece of crepe paper from his pocket. He held his lighter to it, and the flame bloomed, devouring the flimsy paper in a hiss of sickly-sweet smoke that smelled like burnt sugar.

From a small, wicker cage on the table, he lifted a sparrow. It was frail, its heart a beat against his own stillness. There was no malice in his expression, only a chilling focus. Then, with a quick twist, there came a sharp, wet crack.

The heartbeat simply... stopped. From another pocket, he pulled out a dainty, lacy doily, the kind a grandmother would use to put under teacups. He wrapped the tiny, broken body, arranging its limp wings with care. He then tucked the small, neat parcel into his jacket pocket and left. Without a word.

Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

Chapter 12: Greta

And the darkness spoke unto the light "Let me devour thee," and the light wept, for it knew not how to resist. — Joseph 615

The wind had a voice up there; it was a lonely whine that scraped against the stone hut and tore at the edges of Greta's coat. It was the only sound she'd expected, the only sound that belonged on the gray, churning sea. But there was another sound beneath it, a silence so profound it felt like a hole cut in the world.

That's where he stood, silhouetted against the bruised sky at the very edge of the cliff. Cthaoc. A figure of nightmare made flesh, returned from whatever grave had claimed him.

Panic, cold and sharp, lanced through her.

He wasn't supposed to be here. He was dead, buried, gone.

Greta's first thought was not of ghosts or magic, but of intruders. Her feet crunched on the gravel, a hesitant motion in the quiet as she backed toward the toolshed. The small, lean-to structure was a bunker of fresh

wood and earthy smells, but it held something more than shovels and shears. Her trembling fingers found the cold, familiar steel of the hunting rifle. The weight was a false comfort, a shield against the impossible. A bullet would not kill him. She didn't want to kill him.

Instead, she stepped out into the wind, the stock pressed tight against her shoulder, the barrel aimed unsteadily at his back. "Don't move," she called out, her voice a thin tremor that the wind immediately snatched and shredded.

He turned, not with the jerk of a man surprised, but with the unhinging slowness of a predator savoring the moment.

The last of the light caught his face, and Greta's breath froze in her lungs.

It was him, but it wasn't.

The hollows of his cheeks were deeper, his skin seemed stretched too tight over the bones. And then the grin split his face. It wasn't an expression of happiness; it was a wound, a too-wide gash of pale teeth in a face that seemed otherwise carved. It reached from ear to ear, an impossibility that made her chest tighten.

The rifle wavered. "How?" she whispered, the question torn from a place of pure disbelief. "How are you back?"

Cthaoc raised his hands, spreading them like a performer revealing a grand, terrible trick. His fingers were long and reaching. "Magic," he hissed, the word sounding like stones grinding together.

He followed it with a slow, deliberate wink, a grotesque parody of conspiracy that felt more violating than a physical touch.

The memory slammed into her then: the walk in the woods last week, the feeling of being watched, and the snap of a twig beyond her sight. She hadn't been alone then, either.

"It was you," she breathed, the rifle suddenly feeling impossibly heavy. "In the woods. When I was on the patio."

"Indeed," His grin didn't falter. "Wasn't counting on your boyfriend, though. Gutted I didn't get you alone."

A small, scornful snort came from behind her. She had almost forgotten he was there. "Greta... you know him?"

Cthaoc didn't spare the newcomer a glance. His eyes, black and empty pits in his face, remained locked on Greta. A bark of dry laughter tore from his throat that held more contempt than a shout ever could. It was a scoff that dismissed them both, that dismissed their fear, their relationship, their very lives as utterly insignificant. The grin on his face widened, an impossible, hungry crescent under the cold, indifferent stars.

Cthaoc's shadow stretched like a creeping sickness across the floor as he slid his hands behind his back, each movement slow, deliberate, a serpent uncoiling. The air hummed with the weight of unspoken threats.

Greta tilted her head, her grin hidden—a hollow curve beneath her fringe, sharp as a blade.

"You really did it, didn't you?" His voice was a grave's whisper, low and furred with frost. He sounded almost...proud.

She stepped back, the grass crunching under her shoes, but her smile didn't vanish—it turned into a bloodless line, a hollow trick of her lips. "I don't know what you mean."

Lies. The word hung between them, thick as rot. Cthaoc's gaze lingered on her throat, the pulse there too still, too wrong. The plants around them held their breath.

Cthaoc didn't blink. "Don't play innocent; we've left that stance in prison, no?"

"I know what you've done."

A flicker of something—grief or triumph—crossed her face, gone in an instant. "You're seeing ghosts."

He took another step. "Oh, my sweet lamb. I wish I was."

Greta's smile stayed, but her eyes—her eyes—were laughing now.

And in the waning light, the thing in front of her tilted its head, grinning like she did.

Dark, tense, and eerie.

Greta's breath steadied as she spun around, her pulse a calm wave against her skin. One moment, Elias had been there—his silhouette a hint of silver against the shadows. Now? Nothing. Only the echo of his absence,

like a candle snuffed out in a windless room. Her fingers twitched toward the cold, gnawing void at her neck, but she dared not move. Then the air shifted. The thing that had called itself Cthaoc was gone too. No trace. No whisper of footsteps. Only the sudden, suffocating hush of a world holding its breath.

Greta's heels dug into the mossy earth as she turned back, her throat tight with the taste of rust and rot. The trees around her seemed to lean closer, their branches clawing at the moonlit fog.

That's when the cold came. Not a breeze, not a chill—a hand. A needle-fine frost slithered up her spine, seeping into her bones.

The air thickened, heavy with the scent of pine and hot air, her own breath, which made it harder to breathe. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her fists clenched so tight her nails bit into her palms. She could feel him out there, lurking beyond the trees, his presence pressing down on her ribcage. He would take her again. She knew he would. A snarl tore through her throat, raw and primal, as she hurled the words into the night. "GO AWAY!"

The scream was a spark.

Her arms lashed outward, and the world shrieked. A hot, violent jolt tore out of her fingertips. It didn't feel like a gift; it felt like something wild and coiled was finally snapping free, writhing through the air as it escaped her skin. The trees on the clearing recoiled. Branches snapped like bones. Trunks as thick as graves exploded in splintered thunder, sent spiraling into the dark. Leaves tore free, twisting in violent eddies that clawed at the sky. Roots ripped free, writhing like serpents as the ground itself seemed to gag. A squirrel, caught mid-leap, froze in the air, its tiny body suspended in the chaos before being flung into the underbrush, its spine cracked—a noise so silent, yet vast through her thoughts.

Greta's breath came in ragged, animal gasps—sharp, desperate pulls of air that burned her throat. The world around her wasn't real. It couldn't be. Not the crunch of leaves under approaching boots. Not the whisper of his voice slithering through the trees like smoke. He was coming. She knew it. Knew it in her bones, in the pulse hammering behind her skull. He would take her. Bind her. Break her.

No.

Not again.

Her chest heaved. Heat surged through her veins. Anger didn't even begin to describe it—this was destruction, pure and filthy. It clawed up from the black pit in her gut, tearing through every thought, every memory, every fragile thread of control until her fingers twitched. Her arms lashed outward again, and the world shrieked. A pulse of something wild and writhing, erupted from her fingertips. The forest recoiled. Branches snapped like bones. Trunks as thick as graves exploded in splintered thunder, sent spiraling into the dark. Leaves tore free, twisting in violent eddies that clawed at the sky.

And then—whiteness.

Her eyes rolled back, not in fear, but in fury. The world blinked out. No trees. No sky. No him. White. A void that swallowed sight whole. She couldn't see—but she felt. She felt the power explode from her, a shockwave so violent it split the air like glass. The ground tore open. Roots shrieked as ancient oaks toppled, crushed like matchsticks beneath an invisible fist. Branches snapped and spiraled into the darkening sky. The forest groaned, then screamed in protest, trees crashing down.

Let it burn. Let it all burn.

It surged outward, hungry, alive. Rocks split. The earth buckled. A nearby creek erupted into the air, water freezing mid-spray before shattering like ice. She stood at the center, arms outstretched, mouth open in a silent snarl.

Beneath her boots, the earth shuddered. Roots ripped free, writhing like worms suspended in the air as the ground itself seemed to gag. A squirrel, caught mid-leap, froze in the air, its tiny body caught in the chaos before being flung into the underbrush.

She dropped down on her knees. Her knees scraped against the cracked soil, a long frozen stalk of grass dug into her shin. Her iris pulsed, then drained to an eerie white. The magic surged again, deeper, darker.

Tug. Tug. Tug.

If he wanted her—he could have the monster instead. Let him try to leash it. Let him walk into the storm and see how far he made it before she unmade him, piece by screaming piece.

She staggered back, her chest heaving. The silence that followed was worse. No birdsong. No rustle of breeze. The groan of fallen oaks and the faint, crackling hum of magic still clinging to the air—like static before a lightning strike.

From the blackness beyond the clearing, a sound roared.

A step. The crunch of twigs. Close.

The world had gone muffled, like she was trapped beneath a bell jar, every sound swallowed by water. Her own heartbeat thudded in slow, heavy waves, and when the thudding of footsteps erupted in the distance, it arrived as little more than a ripple—an echo that couldn't pierce the thick, silent gloom.

A voice called her name, raw and urgent, but it bubbled up through the static, indistinct, like a stranger's scream from the bottom of a well. She turned, or maybe her head moved on its own, and there he was: a shadow lunging out of the fog, his face a mask of panic. His hands were everywhere, gripping her shoulders, shaking her like a marionette with broken strings. The world snapped—not louder than a pebble dropping in a pond—but sharper, a jolt of cold that clawed up her spine.

Her eyes darted downward—toward her hands, which should have been familiar, hers, but now felt like foreign things grafted onto her wrists. They weren't shaking. No, that would have been normal. Understandable. But instead, they were still, too still.

And beneath the skin, something thrummed. A pulse—hers, she told herself—only it didn't beat in time with her heart. It crawled, a slow, wet rhythm that pulsed up from her fingertips, coiling through her tendons like roots sinking into damp soil. She clenched her fists, desperate to suppress it, but the movement only made it worse—the pulse flared, hotter, hungrier, and for a split second, she swore she saw a dark vein twitch on its own, like a worm beneath glass.

Her mouth was a desert. She swallowed, but her tongue scraped against bone-dry flesh. A low hum vibrated in her skull, not a sound but a pressure, like something grinding inside her molars. And then—faint at first—a whisper, not in her ears but behind them, in the hollows of her jaw. Greta clawed at her arms, nails biting into skin, but the deeper she dug, the more her flesh resisted—resilient, elastic, as if something beneath was pushing back. She stumbled toward the tree, desperate to grab onto something. She screamed. But the sound that came out wasn't hers. It was lower. Deeper. And inside her chest, her heart didn't skip. It laughed.

She does not think, she simply rushes to her feet, bursting through the meadow like something unchained, bare feet slapping against the hardened soil, lungs burning with the metallic tang of panic. The meadow stretches before her—once a field of golden daisies and lazy summer afternoons—now a dead, gray expanse under a moonless sky. A sky she only feels. Not sees.

The air is thick, too still, as if the world has stopped breathing to watch her fall. She collapses onto her knees, gasping, her fingers sinking into cold grass that crunches like old bones. That's when her eyes finally let in light. And she sees her. Meters away where the meadow almost borders the sea.

Her mother stands at the edge of the clearing, one step beyond the rotting apple tree with the carriage and the worms, frozen in the pale glow of the porch light's dying reach. She wears the cream-white apron, once crisp, now stained dark at the hem, the fabric stiff with something that isn't flour. Her brown hair is coiled in its usual neat twist, but strands hang loose, too long, too greasy, snaking down her back like roots. Her face—her face is wrong. Pale, waxen, stretched too tight across her skull, lips peeled back in a grin too wide to belong to a living thing.

And she's laughing.

Not the warm, melodic sound from childhood lullabies, but a raw noise—choking, jagged—like breath escaping a corpse. Her head tilts at an unnatural angle, one shoulder higher than the other, and her arms hang limp, fingers twitching.

She doesn’t blink.

Her eyes are black pits, reflecting nothing, yet fixed on her daughter.

“Mama?” The word trembles out, too loud in the suffocating silence.

The laughter stops. The grin remains.

Then she moves—not walking, but sliding, her feet dragging without sound across the earth, leaving behind glistening furrows that smell of damp soil and decay. A low hum begins—not from her mouth, but from inside, like bees trapped beneath her skin.

“I’m proud of you,” she says, voice layered—her tone warped with something deeper, ancient, hungry—not motherly at all. “I watched you run. Like I taught you. But you can’t outrun me, sweetheart. I’m already inside.”

Tears burn on Greta's cheeks. She tries to back away, but the grass grows longer and knots around her ankles, pulling her down. The apron flutters now, not in any wind—there is no wind, she hadn’t reached the cliff yet—but as if something writhes beneath it.

“You’ve been so strong,” her mother whispers, now inches away, breath reeking of milk gone sour, roses left too long in the vase. “But it’s time to come home. Time to join.”

The last thing she sees is that smile—wider, splitting at the corners—before a large hand comes down to clasp onto her shoulder.

Greta spun, heart hammering like something inside her wants out, and the scream tore from her throat before she even saw the face. It was pure instinct—survival screaming through her veins—as her fist lashed out, cracking against bone with a sickening thud. The figure staggered back, a shadow unraveling into the dim, flickering light of the patio bulb. Blood—dark and glistening—spilled from his nose, splattering onto the floor like drops of ink in water.

It was Kristian.

But for a breathless, fractured moment, Greta wasn't sure. The air was too thick, her breathing too quick, and her mind completely elsewhere. Perhaps still focused on the squirrel.

Kristian lifted a trembling hand, wiping the blood across his sleeve, then held his palms up, fingers splayed—calming a cornered prey animal. "I mean no bad," he said, his voice low, strained. "Margareta, it's me. It's me."

She didn't believe him.

Not at first.

Her chest heaved, each breath a ragged gasp, her body still primed to fight or flee. Terror didn't care about logic. It pulsed behind her eyes, whispering that nothing in this house was what it seemed—not the moaning pipes beneath the floorboards, not the way the walls seemed to breathe when no one was looking, and certainly not Kristian. It was wrong. Not him. Her. She was wrong. She came back wrong.

"Sweetheart," he said again, softer now, stepping cautiously forward. The grass crunches underneath him. "You're shaking."

She flinched. His voice was right—familiar—but the way he said her name... it curled in her ears like smoke. Too smooth. Too measured. Wrong. Like she stuffed wool in her ears.

Her fingers curled into fists at her sides, nails biting into her palms, grounding her in the pain.

"What happened?" he asked, his eyes wide, full of concern that looked almost too real. Almost human.

She opened her mouth. No sound came out. How could she explain? That she'd been standing by the tree—that her hands shook, that white light had exploded from them—and she'd seen something move behind her. Not a reflection. Not at first. It was a ripple in the glass, like something beneath the surface, swimming up. And then—then—a face. Not hers. Not Kristian's. Something else. A gaunt, grinning thing with too many teeth and eyes like black pits where the light went to die. It had reached—not out of spite like Cthaoc usually did, but almost careful—and she had felt the icy brush of fingers on her neck before she turned and screamed and lashed out.

But now Kristian was here. Real. Bleeding. Human.

Wasn't he?

She stared at the blood on his sleeve. It looked real. It smelled real. But the longer she looked, the more it seemed... off. Too dark. Like syrup. And when he wiped his nose again, the blood didn't stop. It welled, slow and steady, as if his veins were pumping something ancient instead of blood.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Then opened them again.

"You weren't supposed to come down here," she whispered, voice cracking.

"I heard you scream." Kristian said, stepping closer. Too close. The stench of copper and damp earth clung to him. "I was worried."

She wanted to believe him. Lord, she needed to. But the meadow's silence was wrong—too polished. The house had been whispering all night, murmuring in the vents, sighing in the walls. Now, nothing. It was only the pounding of her heart and the soft, wet drip of Kristian's blood hitting the grass. She shouldn't be able to hear it. How it dropped. Yet she did.

"Something's in the house," she breathed. "It's not—you don't understand. I saw it."

Kristian tilted his head. A flicker passed over his face—for an instant—but it was enough. The light from the bulb caught his eyes, and for a fraction of a second, they weren't brown. They were black. Endless. Like the thing in the mirror.

And then it was gone.

He blinked. Looked concerned again. "You're scared. I understand. But it's ok. I'm here."

She backed away. Backed away until she felt her body pressing against the cold bark of a tree behind her. The wood groaned, as if something inside it shifted. Or like something inside her listened.

"You don't understand," she repeated, tears burning her eyes. "It's wearing faces. It's been watching me. Waiting."

Kristian smiled. Slowly. Gently.

“It’s ok,” he doesn’t reach out to her. He just….stands there. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

But as he said it, the bulb on the patio flickered once—twice—and in the darkness between flashes, Greta saw it. From the corner of her eye.

For a heartbeat. His face rippled, like a reflection in disturbed water, and beneath the skin, something old and hungry grinned back.

She didn’t scream. Only squeezed her eyes shut.

And Kristian stepped closer, hand outstretched, saying her name over and over, soft and sweet and… wrong.

Greta squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the knot that tightened in her stomach, trying to ignore how her teeth ground onto each other. But then Kristian’s voice was gone.

And everything went silent. Even the wind.

When she finally forced them open, the world swam—blurred figures loomed above her, their faces shifting, melting like wax in the darkness. The sky split open above, a void where stars should have been. Her head whipped around, and the porch light was no longer flickering. It died.

She tried to scream, but her breath caught in her throat—then the sharp sound tore free, tearing through the silence. The figures didn’t flinch. They only watched, hollow-eyed and grinning with too many teeth. And when her vision cleared, they were gone.

No footprints. No trace.

But Kristian was there. The damp grass gave a sickening squelch as he took another step closer. Then came the ambush. An explosion of cold, hard limbs seized her from behind, not a comfort but a trap. A shriek tore from Greta’s throat, useless as smoke.

Her fingernails raked lines against the flesh of his forearms, but he didn’t even flinch. "Go away!" she sobbed, the words swallowed by the crushing pressure.

His arms were a cage, compressing her ribs, stealing the very air from her lungs. The rumble of his voice vibrated through her bones. "Calm down, sweetheart. You need to calm down."

Her kicks connected with something immovable, something that didn't feel like flesh and blood at all. The word "sweetheart" was a shard of glass in her ear. One she wanted to slit his throat with.

“Let go!” she shrieked, twisting, kicking, her heel connecting with his shin. Pain should have flared in his eyes, but there was nothing—no wince, no reaction.

His fingers dug into her shoulders, thumbs pressing above her collarbones, holding her in place as if he were trying to anchor her.

From one minute to the next, the world didn’t go dark; it shattered. A crack echoed in the sudden, stunning silence as the stone connected with her temple, and Greta’s consciousness was torn away by a burst of blinding pain that exploded behind her eyes.

When she next surfaced, it was a slow, agonizing crawl through a thick blackness. The first thing she registered was the drumming—a deep ache that kept her own heartbeat on the back of her skull. She was lying on something stiff and scratchy, a coarse fabric that smelled of dust, old incense.

Her eyelids fluttered open to a gloom illuminated by a bruised, purple light. It oozed from three towering stained-glass windows, casting the portraits of weeping saints and grimacing martyrs across the stone floor like grotesque, distorted puppets. She threw her head back, a motion that sent a fresh wave of nausea through her, and saw the ceiling was a nightmare of dark wooden beams crisscrossing far above her like the bars of a cage.

With a pained groan, she forced her head to the right. The door to her room was ajar, a perfect rectangle of deeper black. Through it, she could see the familiar grandeur of the cathedral’s nave, but it was the altar, framed in that slice of void, that made her blood run cold. It wasn't the gold cross or the flickering candles that held her gaze, but the things arranged carefully upon it—gleaming metal implements that looked far too much like tools, and in the center, a dark stain that hadn’t been there before.

The air in the bedroom hung thick and stale, as though the walls themselves had stopped breathing.

When Kristian stepped into the room, it wasn't with the soft presence Greta had come to expect, no gentle footfall, no murmured endearment.

He knelt beside the bed, and it was only then, as her eyes adjusted to the dimness, that Greta saw the glint of black fabric wrapped around her left ankle. A rope, thick and blackened like rusted sinew, coiled around the bedpost and bit into her skin with an unyielding grip. A whimper clawed its way up her throat, dying in her teeth.

"What is this?" she demanded, her voice trembling between fury and disbelief. Her chest rose and fell in sharp, panicked bursts, veins tightening in her neck as she yanked at the rope.

It didn't budge. The hemp had been wound expertly, fused to the wooden front legs of the bed so thoroughly it might have grown there like a parasitic root. Brunost sat in the corner, his eyes staring at Greta, ears peeled back so far, they flattened on his head.

Her fingers scrabbled at the links, nails splitting against the unrelenting fabric, but all that came was the sound of scraping and the soft, mocking clink of her helplessness.

Kristian didn't flinch. He exhaled, long and weary, as if the sight of her struggle were a burden he had always known he'd have to bear. Slowly, he reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her forehead—a gesture once tender, now grotesque in its familiarity. His fingers lingered too long, cold against her fevered skin.

"For you," he whispered, his voice cracking like old wood. "For your best."

Greta recoiled as much as the rope allowed. "What? What are you talking about?" Her breath came faster, shallower. "Let me go, Kristian. Please."

But he didn't move. His eyes—once warm, the color of damp earth—were now hollow. He reached beside the bed and lifted something wrapped in burlap, the fabric peeling away like shedding skin to reveal a tarnished silver cross. It wasn't any cross. It was misshapen, the arms uneven, the center marred with engravings that looked less like scripture and more like warnings. Beneath it, nestled in the folds, lay a vial of dark liquid and a jagged-handled knife with a blade that seemed to ripple in the faint light.

“I don’t know what he did to you,” Kristian said, his voice low, reverent. “But I saw it in your eyes. I heard it in your voice. That wasn’t you, Greta. That wasn’t my Greta.”

“You’re insane!” she screamed, yanking at the rope until her ankle burned. “I’m right here! It’s me! You’re doing this to me—why are you doing this?” Tears spilled down her cheeks, burning and acidic, but she refused to let them weaken her. She thrashed, muscles straining, heart slamming against her ribs like a caged animal. “Let me go, or I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Kristian asked, calm, almost serene. “Scratch at the walls like the others? Whisper in that voice that isn’t yours? Beg for blood the way you did last night?” He leaned closer, his breath sour with cloves and something darker—something rotten. "I saw it. The words you scratched into the floorboards. I know what hides in you now.”

Greta froze. Her breath caught. Because it was true—she had woken with blood under her nails, with phrases scrawled in languages she didn’t know crawling up the bedroom wall. Not Old Norse, something more ancient. But she remembered nothing. Only dreams—hollow, endless corridors, a figure watching from the dark, and a voice, thick and guttural, singing lullabies in the back of her skull.

“That... that wasn’t me,” she whispered, but her voice wavered.

Kristian’s hand closed around the cross. “It will be,” he said. “If I don’t stop it.”

“No,” she begged, shaking her head, her hair wild and tangled. “Kristian, please. Please, I’m not—. You love me. You said you loved me.” Her sobs twisted into a feral growl, raw and furious. “Please.”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he raised the cross, its tarnished surface catching the faint glimmer of the room that seemed to breathe around them—the temperature dropped, and the shadows stretched and gathered near the corners, as if recoiling from the object. And then, with a slow, unnatural motion, Kristian began to chant.

The words were something Greta recognized, or at least somewhat. Er illt gegn mér hyggja. Devise. Against. Evil. They slithered from his lips, harsh syllables that clawed at the air. At first, nothing happened.

Then—her skin began to crawl.

A coldness spread from her core, deeper than bone, as if something buried deep inside her had been startled awake. Her breath hitched. Her eyes rolled back—and something beneath her skin moved. A ripple, not of muscle or flesh, but of something else—something coiled and ancient.

She screamed.

Not in pain.

In protest.

The voice that tore from her throat was not her own. It was layered—deeper, older, echoing as though coming from the depths of a well. Her body arched off the bed, muscles locking, tendons standing like steel cables beneath her skin. The rope rattled violently, the bedpost groaning as if under immense strain.

Kristian didn't stop. He chanted louder, pressing the cross to her forehead. It seared her skin—smoke curled upward, and the stench of burning flesh filled the room.

Greta's hands clenched into claws. Her mouth opened in a silent scream—and then, a name poured out, guttural and wrong: a name that made Kristian stagger back, his face pallid with terror.

And then silence. Only the screech of Brunost as he scurried out of the room. Terrified.

Greta collapsed against the mattress, trembling, her breath ragged, her body sticky with sweat and blood.

Her eyes fluttered open—clear, human, angry.

"Kristian..." she breathed, her voice her own again. "What did you do?"

"It's not over," he murmured. "It's only sleeping."

His words claw at her skull, each word a splinter driving deeper into her brain. Her vision fractures—lights bloom, distort, then burn. A searing crack splits her ribs as his hand slams onto her forehead. She wants to scream, but her throat gags on a metallic rot.

A blade of light slices across her lids. White. Her own eyes, hollow—glassy, dead. She can't blink. Can't breathe. The thing inside her laughs. Greta doesn't. She only stares at Kristian, wide-eyed, terrified of what she'd seen him become in the name of religion.

She remembered the boy who laughed under summer skies, but this thing before her wore his face like a stolen mask. The sermons had started quietly—prayers whispered in the dark—but now the walls of the chapel echoed with chants that hammered like insects through her skull.

He didn't blink. Didn't smile. He watched her with the cold hunger of something that had long shed its humanity. And when she finally met his gaze, all she wanted was to gouge out his eyes.

Hush, little Lamb

Chapter 13: Elias

And the darkness said "Let there be light," and the light said "Let me burn it all," And it was so — Lukas 2:12

The basement air felt thick and heavy, like wet wool pressed against his skin. It smelled of rotting dirt and old blood, as if the walls were weeping rust. A single bulb flickered above, making the shadows on the concrete crawl like giant insects. Elias was only there to wash the dirt off his hands—a black, greasy soil that felt too rich, like it had been fed on something dead. As he moved, the floorboards screamed under his feet.

There, in the farthest corner of the basement, the door to the utility room stood ajar. A faint gurgling, wet and wracking, spilled from within.

Greta's silhouette floated in the dim light, hunched over the porcelain sink, her knuckles white as bone as they clawed at the basin's edge. Her body convulsed in violent spasms, each heave tearing a writhing, winged thing from her mouth.

Moths—dozens of them—pelted the cold tile, their delicate bodies trembling in the unnatural stillness after flight. Their wings, mottled in sickly hues of ash and bile, clung to the water's surface in the sink, where a sluggish film of something darker spread like oil. Greta's back arched, her spine a splintered bow, as another moth slid from her lips, its antennae twitching with the last seconds of life.

The stench hit next: copper and decay, the cloying sweetness of spoiled fruit. The moths she drove out were not merely released but ripped from her, their passage leaving gashes along her jaw and throat, where blood mingled with saliva and the faint, acrid smell of their crushed kin. Greta's muffled cries were lost beneath the symphony of her own vomiting—a wet, gurgling pitch topped by the thunk of moth bodies hitting the floor, their legs twitching in frantic, broken arcs.

The utility room's mirror above the sink reflected her face: eyes rolled back to reveal the milky whites, pupils shriveled to pinpricks, and her lips pulled tight over teeth stained with something Elias couldn't make out from the distance.

A step closer, and the moths stirred. Not all were dead. One, its wings still damp with whatever had spawned it, scuttled toward the drain, only to be swarmed by others—emaciated, skeletal things with abdomens too large, their undersides oozing the same viscous black soil from the flowerpots.

Elias's breath hitched as his boot crunched over a wing, the sound like grinding glass. His hand, raised to steady himself against the doorframe, hovered above the nearest moth pinned beneath the sink's faucet. It was the atlas moth, its wings too large, too baroque, as though it had devoured color to survive. One wing lay splintered, the torn edge frayed and pulpy, a line that mirrored the wound in Greta's throat. It twitched, a spasmodic jerk of a dying thing, its body convulsing as if trying to will itself forward through the sink's grim tide.

Around it, the moths lay in a carnage of frass and blood. Their bodies, swollen and translucent, bore the same black soil within their bellies, their legs still jerking as though trapped in the final stages of some ancient, instinctual flight. The water in the sink had darkened to the color of ink, flecked with glistening specks of scarlet—blood, not from the moths, but from Greta, her vomiting having carved an internal gash in her abdomen that had not yet closed. The blood from her mouth slid toward the broken atlas moth, its writhing form a macabre puppet dragged under by unseen strings.

Greta slumped forward, her forehead thudding against the sink, the sound muffled by the swarm of moths now crawling over her wrists, their tiny mandibles gnawing at the skin between her fingers. She made a sound then, low and resonant, like a bell submerged in water, as her body shuddered with one final retch. From her mouth, a single moth emerged with wings still damp and curling—its body too plump, its separation too fluid, as though it had not yet decided what it was meant to become. It landed on her forearm, and the others stilled, their wings folding in respect.

The light bulb above them sputtered and died. In the sudden dark, the moths' wings began to flutter in unison, a sound like the first whisper of a storm. And in the sink, the broken atlas moth ceased its twitching.

From the shadows of the basement doorway, Elias watched, his expression unreadable. He took a step, his boot connecting with a forgotten metal pail. The resulting clatter was a violence of sound in the silent room, and Greta's convulsing ceased.

She turned slowly, her mouth a glistening ruin of bile and twitching wings, and her eyes, wide with a new and separate terror, searched for his. He did not move, only offered the faintest, cruel smile.

Elias scrambled up the basement steps, not caring to look back. Below, the muffled sounds of Greta's heaving echoed off the stone walls until, with one final, guttural choke, a silence descended. It was a listening quiet.

He fumbled with the lock and shoved his way into the garden, gasping for air that offered no relief. The night was cold; it would be for the next two hours until morning, and the scent of damp soil and sweetly rotting gardenias hung thick in the dark, a funeral perfume that clung to his skin as the shadows of the

plants seemed to writhe around him. He hated these moths. He had always hated them. No matter how much they were his.

Elias tucks himself into the shadowed corner of the rusted wrought-iron patio, the warm flame of his cigarette flickering against the dusk. The air reeks of tobacco and damp rot, the kind of stillness that holds its breath before a storm—or a revelation. Behind him, the screen door slams. He doesn't turn, not really: he knows what—or who—awaits.

Cthaoc's silhouette materializes between the shrubs, a shape that feels older than the earth, its edges a mess of chipped wallpaper. It—he—nods, and the gesture is so intimate it curdles the blood.

Elias mutters that the others are inside, a half-truth buried under the tremor of his voice, and watches as Cthaoc ascends to the creaking swing, its chains groaning like they were breathing. The entity perches, knees bent, spine curled like a snake, and for a moment, the stars seem to dim—moths fleeing from the light.

"Heard the screams last night," rasps Elias, ash crumbling from his fingers. His name for Greta is a whisper, a prayer, a curse—they did something to her.

The words hang, but Cthaoc only lifts a hand, palm up, revealing veins that writhe like ink seeping through skin. "Felt it," he murmurs, voice a vibration in the marrow. His fingers twitch, and Elias sees it too: the faint echo of a scream trapped in the pores of his own flesh, a memory that isn't his.

The swing begins to move, though no wind stirs, and the door of the house slams shut behind him. Neither man flinches.

"I heard someone died."

The floorboards beneath Elias' feet groaned in protest of his shifting weight. "Yeah," he managed, forcing a hollow sound that tried to be a laugh. "They die like flies here, don't they?"

"Why was there no funeral?"

Elias ran a hand over his sweat-slicked hair. "If you ran from a bloodhound, would you make yourself bleed?"

"They're scared," stated Cthaoc, his teeth grinding together. The entity tilted its head at an impossible angle,

joints cracking in the silence.

"Rightfully so." Elias's eyes darted toward the boarded-up window, wondering if the others were listening.

Cthaoc furrowed his brows. "And she understands?"

Elias shrugged, the movement jerky and unnatural. "Not sure. I tried, but..." He trailed off as Cthaoc rose from the chair, movements so rigid they seemed to splinter the very air around it. The creature's bent fingers brushed against a dusty photograph on the mantle wrapped in cling film—Greta and her mother, smiling. Before the sickness took her.

"The dead don't like to be forgotten," whispered Cthaoc, its breath cold against Elias's cheek despite the distance between them. "Especially when they're buried in shallow graves."

From the little basement window below came the sound of shovels hitting dirt, rhythmic and relentless, groaning against the hard surface.

"They always come back," Cthaoc's voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Always."

The swings hang motionless now, their chains slack and groaning with each gust of wind, as if the air itself mourns what has passed.

Elias stands beneath them, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket, eyes fixed on the empty swaying seats—too slightly, as though something recently vacated them. The entity is gone.

He can feel it in the marrow of his bones, a sudden hollow lightness, like a tooth pulled without anesthetic. But the silence it left behind is worse. It doesn't ring true. It's the silence of held breath, of something waiting behind the curtain of reality to be acknowledged. The garden—once a place of laughter, of scraped knees and high-pitched shrieks—feels petrified, as if frozen mid-scream. The wooden benches are splintered, the paint flaking like dead skin. Even the grass crunches underfoot, gray, resisting life. And then, cutting through the metallic whine of the swings, was a voice.

It's Kristian, walking across the dead lawn, his boots crushing frost-dusted weeds. His face is drawn, eyes dark-rimmed and glassy, like a man who hasn't slept in weeks—or perhaps one who has dreamed too much.

Elias flinches, then hurries toward him, his steps quickening before slowing again, as if his body can't decide whether to flee or confront. When he reaches Kristian, he clears his throat, voice papery. "When's the funeral?"

Kristian frowns, his gaze drifting past Elias toward the swings, then upward, to the bare branches of the oak above. "Funeral?" he echoes, the word tasting foreign on his tongue.

"For Esja," Elias presses, his voice rising slightly, tinged with disbelief. "I thought... they'd at least bury her. Say something."

A pause. Long enough for the wind to rattle the swings again, a dissonant chorus. Kristian's jaw tightens. He doesn't look at Elias when he speaks. "No," he says flatly. "No funeral."

Elias stares. "Why not?"

Kristian turns then, and his eyes—once soft, familiar—are sunken, cold. There's something behind them, Elias thinks, something that doesn't belong. "Because she isn't worthy of one," Kristian says, his voice low, almost reverent.

Elias takes a step back. "What? Of course she's—she died."

"We saw what it wanted us to see," Kristian interrupts, voice sharp as broken glass. "Esja didn't die, Elias. She was taken. And now she's being returned."

"Returned?" Elias whispers, the word catching like a thorn in his throat.

Kristian finally lifts his hand, pointing toward the river that snakes along the edge of the park. The water glistens black beneath the overcast sky, slow and thick, as if it flows not with liquid but with something thicker. Blood, or oil. "Greta's down there," he says. "She's preparing the rites."

"Rites?" Elias feels the ground tilt beneath him. "What are you talking about?"

"Greta knows the old ways," Kristian murmurs, his voice dropping to a whisper that seems to blend with the wind. "She understands what we brought into this world. What she became."

Elias remembers the night Esja vanished—the way the air thickened, how the lights in her house flickered violently before going out. How her scream cut off mid-breath, like a song erased from tape. And Kristian, standing in the doorway, smiling. Smiling.

"You can't be serious," Elias says, backing away. "She's not coming back. Nothing comes back from that."

Kristian turns fully now. There's a smile on his face—small, terrible. "Oh, but she will. The water has already accepted her. The river doesn't drown. It transforms."

From downstream, a low hum rustles—beneath hearing, like the vibration of a float on water. The swings creak louder, nearly in unison. Elias looks back. The seats are swinging again, higher now, though no one sits in them. No child laughs. No one pushes.

"Did you ever wonder why the swings move even when there's no one here?" Kristian says, still smiling. "It's not the wind. It's her. She's swinging. Practicing."

Elias frowns, not sure whether to laugh. "Ok."

"Wait until tonight," Kristian says, voice softening, almost gentle. "Wait until the water recedes. You'll see her rise. Pale. Perfect. Changed. Greta will pray, and the river will give her back. Not as she was. But as she was always meant to be."

And then, from the riverbank, a sound—melodic, mournful. Greta's voice, rising in song, calling across the dark water.

Kristian turns and begins to walk, coat flapping like wings behind him. "Come if you want to see her," he calls over his shoulder. "But don't expect the girl you knew."

He didn't know her. Elias didn't care to. He didn't care that she died. He didn't care when she lived.

Alone again, Elias stands frozen beneath the groaning swings, watching as the river darkens further, swallowing the horizon. And beneath the song, beneath the wind, he thinks he hears it—the faint, rhythmic squeak of chains. Back and forth. Back and forth. Swinging.

The woods exhaled a thick mist as Elias watched Kristian step toward the lake, his breath shallow, his fingers brushing the damp earth to pluck up blackened leaves that crumbled like old bone between his fingers.

The air smelled of rot and stagnant water, and the trees seemed to lean inward, watching. When he glanced back, Elias stood frozen in place, his body jagged against the dim light. Their eyes met—and Elias shook his head.

Further down the path, near the sagging iron bones of the old bridge, Jasper stepped out from the fog like a specter. Elias approached, his boots squelching in the moss-choked soil.

"They're all insane here," he muttered, staring at the water's oily surface where something beneath broke the reflection with a ripple.

Jasper let out a low, guttural laugh that didn't touch his hollow eyes. He clapped a cold hand on Elias's shoulder—too tight, too long. "Some of them, yes," he whispered, as if sharing a secret with the dead.

Then Elias saw David—barefoot, shirt torn—lurching from the tree line, clumps of matted, blood-streaked sheep fur clutched in his fists. His mouth split into a grin too wide, teeth glinting wetly, he jerked his head around in an unnatural motion, nodding.

Elias raised his hand to wave, but froze when he heard it—the guttural clicking from behind the wood's edge, rising in pitch. The water bulged, and trees curled inward. The leaves Kristian had gathered began to move in his palm, twitching like dying insects. No one screamed. Screaming had stopped weeks ago.

The scent of sour milk curdled in the air as Elias spun on his heel. The group trudged toward the lake, their footsteps muffled by the blackened earth, candles clutched like talismans in shaking hands. A faint, sweet rot clung to the breeze—dried sunflowers and honey, but there was something else beneath it, a metallic tang that made his throat tighten.

The water ahead gleamed like polished obsidian, reflecting not the moon, but a deeper, wronger sky. Elias's boots sank into the mud as he followed, the candles' flicker revealing faces drawn in shadows, lips pressed into thin, unyielding lines.

He lingered at the farmhouse's threshold, the door groaning under his grip. The dried flower circle—once a cradle of marigolds and thorns—shattered on the floorboards, petals crumbling to dust. He crouched, fingers brushing the fragments, and a cold prickle crawled up his spine.

Not from Greta's sister, he thought bitterly. She died a year ago, thought Elias. But these petals, they belonged to a funeral that had been a week past, they still seemed to whisper prayers and blood-soaked soil. The house breathed around him then, creaking like a thing disturbed from sleep.

The lake's surface rippled suddenly, though no wind stirred. Elias turned back to the group, their faces now obscured by animal masks, their candles dripping black ichor. The smell of honey thickened, sickly and artificial, and he realized the sunflowers—they'd always loved sunflowers—had been arranged in a pattern, pointing not toward the water, but toward him. The flowers he held in his palm began to writhe, their dust coalescing into a single, perfect petal—yellow, and too warm.

He knew then. They had never been mourning. They had been preparing for this. And the lake, dark and patient, had been waiting for a body. And now they had one.

Elias stood at the porch's edge, his fingers brushing the splintered railing as he gazed one last time at the lake. The water lay still, a mirror of slate-gray clouds, its surface broken only by the faint ripples where mourners had cast their offerings—flowers, coins, whispered goodbyes. The funeral had been quiet, like the rest of the summer, like the rest of them now.

With a shiver he didn't feel, Elias turned from the lake and stepped into the house, its threshold warm with the cloying scent of mildew and old wood.

The kitchen was dim, the single bulb overhead flickering as if straining to hold its light. Elias sat at the table, his palms pressing into the grain of the wood, and reached for the ceramic vase on the windowsill. Inside, a cluster of daisies wilted under his touch, their petals curling like burnt paper. He didn't stop himself. The flowers always died here. Had they ever truly been alive, or had they just mimicked life, as though the house

itself were a counterfeit? A dry stem snapped beneath his thumb, and he let the debris fall, watching it pool like ash at his fingers' tips.

Jasper entered without a sound, his shadow cutting the hallway's gloom like a door. He leaned against the doorway, his eyes fixed on Elias, and when he finally spoke, his voice was a low hush.

"It's only a matter of time." The words weren't new—Jasper had muttered variations of them for weeks, since bodies had been pulled from the lake, their hair fanned around them like waterweed, their lips the blue of drowning. But now, they felt like a verdict.

Elias pushed the chair away and moved down the hallway. Jarpar followed him without a word, their footsteps muffled by the carpet, its pattern of forget-me-nots faded to brown.

The walls were lined with framed photographs, their glass surfaces clouded with dust. Elias traced the edges of the frames with his fingertips, breathing through the film of grime as he searched the faces staring back at him.

There was the mother, her smile weak, her hands folded over a baby basket that had never held a child. The father, flanked by pines at the lake's edge, his expression a hollow mask.

And there—there—was Greta, laughing at the beach, her arms full of seashells, her bare feet buried in sand.

Elias's pulse stuttered. When had she ever gone to the beach? The house, the lake, the funeral—hadn't that been the extent of her last weeks, months, her whole life? He leaned closer, squinting at the photo's edges. The background was wrong, too bright, as though it had been inserted from another time, another life.

"She took it herself," Jasper said, his voice soft as a sigh behind him. "Before we knew."

Elias straightened, his throat tight. "Knew what?"

Jasper didn't answer. Instead, he pointed to another frame, a group shot of the family at the lake, Greta's absence a glaring hole in its composition. But when Elias blinked, or maybe when he thought he blinked, the photo had shifted. There she was, at the edge of the frame, her face pale, her eyes wide—watching them now.

"You see it now, don't you?" Jasper murmured. "She never left the lake. But we're all still here."

“What is this place?” Elias asked.

Jasper smiled, a slow, weary curve of his lips. “A waiting room,” he said. “And the doors don’t open for long.”

A clock began to tick—a dull sound that hadn’t been there before. Elias glanced at his hands, now drenched in water, and saw the first petal of a new flower between his fingers, already beginning to die.

The shutters slammed shut with a violence that shook the bones of the house, and he looked away. A groan of splintering wood echoed through the hollow interior as the green paint—once a garish attempt at cheer—cracked, then crumbled to dust. It rained down in thick, ashen clouds, coating the floorboards in a film. The air grew heavy, clogging the throat with the scent of iron as though the walls themselves had bled.

The shutters were open moments ago. Elias saw the light spill in, silver, false, and defiant. Now, darkness gnaws at the edges of the room, a hunger that hums in the silence. The dust clings to his skin, fine as powder, but it feels alive—twitching, crawling, sinking into the lines of his palm.

A loose floorboard creaks behind him. He doesn’t turn. He knows the room is empty now. And yet the sensation of being watched coalesces in the corners, where the shadows gather too thickly. The shutters tremble, as though something on the other side is pressing against them—claws, maybe, or fingers, or something larger.

Elias backs away, but his foot catches on something. A fragment of paint curls beneath his shoe, revealing the floorboards’ true state: not wood at all, but bone, the grain twisted into grotesque faces. The house is breathing. He can feel it now, a slow, rattling inhale that makes his lungs burn. The shutters burst open suddenly, and for a heartbeat, he saw her—Marit, his mother, or what’s left of her, her face frozen in a grin of fractured green, her eyes two hollows filled with the same dust that coated the room. But she was dead. She died in 2000 when Elias shot her with his father’s shotgun.

He sees it more clearly now.

The torn pearl bracelet from his grandfather was scattered on the dark stairs. He feels it now, too. How the

cold air brushed his arm when he reached down to grab it. And how the basement's light bulb began to flicker aggressively above him. He'd called for her, but she only called him a monster. And then all he had seen was the blinding light behind his eyes, how much it hurt, and how his hands automatically, in a trance, grabbed the pickaxe. And how each of their blood had then dropped down the stairs. Drop. Drop. Drop. Stefan's skull, torn in two. And then the police sirens and how Elias had cried and cried and didn't stop. How Elias grabbed a gun and the officers shot him. How he woke up on an empty street in Lillehammer with clean clothes and his family and the officers dead. All dead. How his childhood ended at age 10 when he was sent to the orphanage.

And then, how the visions had started, how all he saw was a blooming poppy field and the number 444 on a house with 27 stairs and a wrought iron railing. 28 birthday candles. Never 29. Greta, age four, running to the forest. Her parents at Trolltunga. He'd seen it all.

And how Odda had called him.

The slam that forced him out of the memory wasn't a sound but a physical blow, a bone-deep answer that sealed the room. Elias stumbled toward the window, his own breath coming in ragged gasps. He clawed at the heavy fabric, but it felt wrong—fragile and clinging, like ancient, desiccated flesh.

As he tore it aside, his fingers found the cold glass. He peered out, expecting something, anything, in the churning dark. But the only thing staring back was his own reflection, its smile wide and stretched impossibly across its face, trapped on the other side of the pane.

In the hollow hush of the abandoned greenhouse, Elias saw Greta. She stood at the center of the ruin, barefoot atop cracked concrete, her silhouette blurred by a feverish shimmer, as though reality struggled to hold her shape. Her hand constantly clutched to her stomach.

Before her, a withered hawthorn sapling—once sickly but still clinging to life—shuddered violently, its bark splitting with wet sounds, veins of black rot spreading up its trunk like oil in water.

Leaves curled and blackened in seconds, falling in clumps. And then, with a sound like a gasp trapped in glass, the plant collapsed into ash, reduced not to decay but to a pile of fine, greasy soot that clung to the air like mourning dust.

Elias watched from the window, his breath shallow, not out of fear for the dying plant, but for the woman who had done it. When it was over, her shoulders slumped, and she exhaled—a long, ragged sound that didn't quite belong to her. Her skin was the color of old paper, her lips tinged violet, and her eyes were sunken, glassy, like marbles dropped into a well. The same eyes he'd seen since he was a boy.

Elias stopped and pushed out of the room onto the porch without a thought. The garden held nothing but stalks and Greta, who stood there, at the edge of the dying flowers.

She didn't startle at the sound of his boots. She was already turned toward him, her gaze fixed on the spot where he would come in, before he'd even entered the pathway.

She looked up at him, but it wasn't a look of recognition, but of a long-awaited arrival, as if she had been counting his heartbeats through the dirt just like he had hers.

He buried his shoes into the ground in front of her, his eyes wandering down her body, and he couldn't hold in an amused scoff. No matter how hard he tried.

"You look like shit, Polly," he said flatly, stepping forward, the crunch of debris beneath his boots jarringly loud in the stillness.

Greta turned slowly, blinking as if she'd forgotten he existed. Then she smiled. Not the warm, crooked grin he knew, but something thinner, stretched too tight over something hollow. "Thanks," she whispered, her voice frayed at the edges, as if each syllable had been dragged across gravel. Her hand drops from her stomach. "Feel like it too."

She swayed slightly, and Elias reached out instinctively but stopped himself before touching her. There was a wrongness in her presence now—like static clinging to the air, a hum beneath the silence that made his molars ache.

She looked lighter, not in the way someone relieved of a burden might feel, but as though parts of her had been scooped out, hollowed by something that didn't care for balance or mercy. Her exhaustion wasn't physical; it was structural, as if her very bones were tired of holding her together.

Elias forced a smirk, the kind he'd used a hundred times before when things were simpler, before the visions started, before the whispers in the walls began sounding like her voice. "You sick or something? Maybe lay off the plant genocide for a while. People might talk." His joke hung in the air, unloved, but Greta laughed—sharp and broken, like glass skittering across stone. It didn't suit her. It didn't suit anything human.

"I was exorcised last night," she said, still chuckling, but her eyes were dry, empty. "Not the way you're thinking. Not ropes and holy water. They didn't cast it out. They... invited it in."

Elias froze. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She tilted her head, a gesture that once seemed playful but now grotesquely mechanical. "You don't see it, do you?" she murmured. "How I'm not... me." Her fingers brushed her cheek, tracing the curve of her jaw with a curiosity that twisted Elias's stomach. "Last night, they opened the door. Not to free me. To let something wear me. They said it would strengthen me. That the power needed a vessel. That I was already cracked." She laughed again, softer this time, almost tender. "They weren't wrong."

Elias stared. He'd known they would do it eventually, but it startled him that she'd confess that easily to a stranger—that she'd only met in the days when she'd braid dandelions into her hair and dare him to eat sour berries just to watch him gag. She had no one else. It was sad.

He knew the freckle above her collarbone, the way she hummed off-key when she was nervous, and the exact shade of gold her hair turned in summer light, but not because he knew her—but because he'd seen it. He'd always seen it.

But now, as she stood before him, he realized with creeping horror that he didn't recognize her face. Not entirely. Her features were close—the nose, the curve of her lips—but subtly shifted, like a portrait painted by someone who'd only heard a description.

Her skin seemed too smooth in places, too tight, as if stretched over something not quite solid. And her eyes—those weren't her eyes anymore. They were deeper, older, and the pupils were dilated too wide, swallowing the light.

"She's still here," Greta said, as if reading his thoughts. "Little scraps. I can feel her screaming. Like a bird trapped behind a wall." She touched her temple, pressing hard, as if trying to silence something beneath the bone. "But she's fading. And it... it likes being seen through my eyes. Likes hearing your voice. Especially when you say I look like shit."

Elias took a step back, half grinning. "Polly—"

"Do you think I wouldn't find out?" Her voice cracked, and for a fleeting second, it was her—the girl who shot her sister in the barn. "I've known since we left the prison. I'm not going to tell them." Then the moment shattered. Her body straightened, the false brightness returning. "Oops," she said, grinning. "Slipped out of character. Don't worry. She doesn't suffer much anymore. Mostly watches. Like you do."

"This isn't funny," Elias whispered, though he wasn't sure if he was talking to the memory or the thing that was finally set free.

"No, it's not. It's not meant to be," she replied, and for the first time, its voice dropped—lower, resonant, a sound too deep for a human throat. "But it is necessary. Erik was a test. A small death to feed the threshold. Soon, there will be larger ones. This world is thin here. And she—she was already cracked. Cthaoc helped. The kind of wound that calls to things that live in the dark."

He remembered the night she'd vanished from the news reports, the DVD's—the search, the police reports, the way her mother wept into a frayed handkerchief. She was four. No body. No trace. Just a journal found in the woods, pages filled with diagrams of runes.

“Are you going to tell Kristian?” he asked, the words thick with threat, like a child caught stealing.

The thing in Greta’s skin tilted her head, considering. “No,” it said softly. “Kristian isn’t like them. He doesn’t look at her like that—with that stupid, sad love in his eyes. He believes. And he’d kill her over it.”

Elias scrambled to his feet, not sure how to react.

“You’ll see her again,” whispered Greta, and in that moment, the voice was hers—the real her—faint, terrified. Her voice trembled. It fractured into a raw plea. The thing nestled in her hollow eyes didn’t answer—it only laughed. Her mouth twisted into a false play on joy. Tears traced paths down her cheeks, but they stank of decay. It hissed through her throat, its laughter that had probably also been chaining her wrists to the bedframe as she writhed the night before.

Now her fingers dug into her own skin, desperate to claw the entity out. Her laughter was unsure again, her wide eyes almost pleading. “Please tell him to run. Please. Spare him. He has nothing to do with it. He is a good man. A believer.”

Then the eyes swallowed the light until they were pools of milk, the grin split like an open wound, and the thing that wore her laughed as he turned and fled into the gathering dark, the weight of her absence pressing against his spine like a hand he could never shake.

When he lunged, it wasn’t rage that guided him, but something colder, more calculated. He slammed her against the rough bark of an old oak, the impact echoing like a snapped bone. She crumpled, her body slack.

Elias crouched beside Greta’s motionless body, her breath shallow, her skin pale under the light. His fingers curled around a strand of hair from her face, the gesture almost tender, though his eyes remained empty, hollowed out. All this time, Elias had thought her to be a monster, to be out of her mind. Now he saw it. The monster was gone, or perhaps it was just hiding. In the silence, leaving only a girl—pale, desperate, and wounded by too many losses. She was just a girl. Desperate to live.

Something human flickered in Elias' eyes, and just when he was about to act on it, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

He pulled it out, letting it ring once—twice—before Jasper's voice, cold and clinical, crackled through the line. "Is it done?"

Elias didn't answer at first. He stared down at Greta, down at the milky white that pooled at her eyes, past her ruined throat, down toward the steady thrum of her heart. His empathy flickered out. "We're ready." He whispered softly.

And, as if the world finally ran out of breath, the clock stopped ticking.

There Was a Crooked Man

Chapter 14 Kristian

To serve is to be the vessel of another's dream. — Joseph 12:8

Every door along the hall was sealed shut, its surfaces worn to a dull sheen, while the windows—paneless voids of black glass—felt more like eyes. The corridor stretched before him, a narrow tunnel of sickly yellow light and shadow. Every door was closed, every window a pane of solid black. Kristian had been calling Greta's name, but the sound was swallowed by the silence. Then he heard it—the slap-slap-slap of bare feet on the cold tiles, echoing from the deep. A figure burst from a turn ahead, pale and unkempt, her motion desperate. Like an animal fleeing.

It was Greta. He raced towards her, relief warring with a sudden, cold dread. She was barefoot, her feet smeared with something dark.

His voice was barely an echo in the stillness. "Greta! What's wrong? Where are you going?"

She crashed to a halt so abruptly it seemed physically impossible, her body perfectly still. She turned, and her face, illuminated by the light, was a mask of a ghost—her eyes wide like a deer. Not scared, observing.

"Kristian," she said, her voice a steady, terrible calm. "Are you ok?"

The question struck him like a physical blow. It was her voice, but not. It was devoid of any energy, stripped of the warmth and panic he knew. It was the voice from a deep, well with stillwater, and hearing it come from Greta's lips was more horrifying than any scream. He could only stare, the words stuck in his throat as unease began to twist his insides.

Then, her knees buckled. It wasn't the graceless jolt of a faint, but the controlled drop of a marionette whose strings had been cut. She sank to the floor, her head tilting forward, her gaze fixing on a point in the empty hallway behind him. Her eyes were wide, vacant pits reflecting the buzzing lights, but seeing nothing of this world. Her lips parted, and out came a gasp.

"You need to run. Run," she whispered, the word barely audible over the creak of the hinges.

Kristian didn't move. He stepped toward her instead, boots sinking slightly into the warped pine, splinters biting through his socks.

He knelt before her, the wood groaning in protest, and cupped her cheek. His thumb brushed her skin, cold as soil. "What's going on?" he asked, voice low, trembling not with fear, but with dread.

Her face changed.

Not a flicker. Not a shift. A transformation. Her lips peeled back in a grin too wide, too sharp.

Cracked porcelain.

Then, a single tear slid down her cheek, tracking through grime, but her eyes remained dry.

The smile warped into something worse—mockery, glee, derision—all tangled in one. She tilted her head, birdlike, and the sound that escaped her throat was layered: a giggle, a sob, a low, guttural chuckle that vibrated in Kristian's bones.

"You think you're free?" he said, fingers tightening slightly on her jaw. "After everything? After Ben? After what he did to us? To you? Are you really going to let something else destroy it all?" His voice cracked.

She had fought their way out of Ben's room, escaped the cellar, the chains, the rituals. They'd clawed through the woods, half-dead, believing they'd made it. He'd chased her through the cornfield, barefoot. And she ran. Believing she'd won. But Greta hadn't slept since. Not really.

She'd sit by the window, humming songs in languages that didn't exist, tracing symbols on the glass with her fingertip—symbols Kristian now recognized from the journal they'd found buried beneath Ben's floorboards.

Greta blinked slowly. Her neck cracked. "What do you mean?" she asked, but her voice wasn't hers.

Kristian swallowed. "We built this. Us. After Ben. We started over. We—"

"We?" She laughed again, and this time it filled the room, vibrating the walls. The lantern flickered. "Do you really think I built anything?" Her head tilted further, tendons straining. "Do you think I was ever free?" She reached up, grasping his wrist, her fingers like ice. "That he ever left when we killed him?"

Kristian froze.

"No," she whispered, her mouth barely moving. "He didn't die. He unfurled. He slipped into the cracks. Into the silence between heartbeats. Into me." Her eyes rolled back, white showing, then snapped forward—pupils gone, replaced by a darkness so deep it seemed to drink the light. "Ben was never the problem. The vessel was. I was."

She leaned closer, breath rancid, smelling of wet earth and decay. "I thought I could fight it. I thought I was free. But the roots were already in. I just didn't realize that."

Kristian pulled back. "Greta—"

"I am Greta," she said, and for a moment, her face softened—her real face, the woman he loved, eyes brimming with terror. "Help me," she mouthed. But then the light died. The grin returned. "And I am not."

Kristian stood before her, his gaunt frame silhouetted against the flickering candlelight, the air thick with the cloying scent of sage and decay. In his palm, the Grimorium Verum Sigil gleamed—a necklace of blackened silver, the central pendant an obsidian disk etched with runes that seemed to jerk when stared at too long.

He pressed it into her hand, his fingers lingering like a curse. "Take it," he hissed, his breath reeking of gravesoil and rot. "It belongs to you."

Her hand trembled as she closed her fingers around the artifact. It was colder than ice and heavier than stone, and the moment her nails dug into the metal, a searing pain lanced through her palm. Kristian squeezed. Blood bloomed.

She didn't cry out. She couldn't. The air had turned suffocating, as though the room itself was holding its breath.

Then, the prayers began.

The pendant grew hot, searing through her skin, and her vision blurred as shadows pooled at the edges of the room, writhing like smoke. Agony blossomed behind her eyes—thrumming, pulsing, as if something were trying to claw its way out of her skull.

She pressed her palms to her temples, but the pain only deepened, and when she pulled her hands away, they were slick with blood. It dripped down her arms, mixing with the earlier wounds.

Kristian didn't stop. His voice rose, and the pendant began to glow. The walls groaned. The candles were extinguished. And in the silence that followed, he heard a whisper. It said her name. Not the one she answered to, but the one carved into the void, the one she hadn't known she had.

Lightbringer.

Kristian let go. The necklace hung around her neck now, its weight a shackle. And as the blood continued to drip, he wondered if her soul had already followed.

"You can't leave," Kristian said, his voice low but final, the weight of years pressing into every syllable. "Not yet."

Greta flinched. Her breath caught. "I don't belong here," her voice was a whisper, eyes fixed on the floor. "I should have stayed in the ground."

Kristian turned fully toward her, his face drawn, etched with grief and suspicion. “Don’t say that,” he said. “Don’t you dare say this. I sacrificed everything for you, and I did it willingly, but don’t you dare go this path now.”

She let out a broken sob, her hands twisting at the hem of her coat as though trying to wring herself clean. “Punish me,” she begged, her voice cracking. “Please, Kristian. Make it right.”

He stared at her, uncomprehending. “Punish you? For what?”

“For surviving,” she whispered, tears now tracing silver lines down her cheeks. “For coming back when I wasn’t meant to. You have to—” Her voice broke. She looked up at him then, her eyes wide and haunted. “You have to burn it. Burn it all out of me.

All expression dropped from his face. Kristian stepped closer, his expression shifting from suspicion to dread, his mouth half agape. And his heart seemed to throb against his ribcage violently. “Burn what? Greta, what are you saying? What happened to you?”

She sank to her knees, the weight of truth collapsing her. “I died,” she said, the words barely audible. “In the bathroom. Maks was there. He saw me. I begged him, but I was past saving.”

He took a step back, stunned. “That was—that was years ago. You can’t be—”

“I know,” she cried, clutching her arms around herself. “I know I shouldn’t be here. But I woke up when you pulled into Mak’s farm. And everything was cold; it was so cold, Kristian. The world was quiet. Snow everywhere. And I—I felt wrong. Cold, but not dead. Hungry, but not for food. And then he was there. And he threatened me. And there was the broken mirror, and the shards and I...”

Kristian’s eyes remain fixed, unblinking, on the blank space between her eyebrows. The room seemed to tilt slightly, and Greta fell out of focus, and for a moment, he was certain the walls were breathing. Her words dissolved around him in a hum, silences stretching and snapping like knives against his gut. Her

voice—meant for someone, something—feels alien, as if it belongs to a stranger echoing from beneath layers of water.

"I came back wrong, Kristian. My heart beats but my breath is borrowed. And whenever I go near anything sacred—" She gestured weakly toward the basin. "—it dies. The poppies turned to ash; they fell to their knees."

Kristian's face paled. He looked from her to the altar, then back again, his hand instinctively reaching for the silver pendant beneath his collar. "No. That means...."

"I know!" she screamed, her voice raw. "I know what I am! But I didn't ask for this! I didn't want to come back! I remember dying—the quiet, the peace. And then—darkness. And then... hunger." Her hand was shaking now. Not in fear. In anger. "I've fought it. I've starved myself. Prayed until my throat bled. But it's in me now."

He reached out a hand, his fingers hovering above her shoulders, afraid to touch. He could see the hurt in her eyes. "Greta, do you know what this means...." He should have known. He should have known the moment she became different. He should have known that no flower would have come back if she hadn't fallen first.

She shook her head slowly, her eyes distant. "Guess death didn't want me. But he did.."

Silence settled between them, thick and suffocating. Finally, Kristian spoke, his voice heavy and each word so slow, it seemed controlled. "If you're truly unclean... if the spirit within you isn't your own—"

"Then burn me," Greta said, meeting his gaze with fraught determination. "Purify me like you would any vessel of corruption. With fire. With salt. With prayer. Let me go properly this time. I don't want to become a thing that preys on the living. I don't want to wake up one night and realize I've forgotten how to cry."

Kristian closed his eyes. A tear almost slipped free, tracing the same path so many before it had taken. When he opened them again, they were wet with grief—but also determination.

“I won’t destroy you,” he said gently. “But I’ll help you end it, if that’s truly your will. The fire won’t be punishment. It’ll be mercy.”

Greta exhaled, her body trembling not with fear but with relief. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Burn it all out of me. And when I’m ash… scatter me where the sun rises. Let me finally be at peace.”

Kristian shakes his head. “Greta…”

Her laughter comes out fractured—half anger, half a sob caught in her throat. “I knew it wasn’t blue,” she murmurs, her voice unsteady. “And I thought it was the bearberries—the color, you know? But it wasn’t that at all. I kept telling myself I was wrong, that I’d imagined it. That maybe grief had finally blurred the lines between memory and madness.”

Kristian frowns, stepping closer. “What pillow? What are you talking about?”

She shakes her head, her eyes distant, as if peering into a room long locked. “The one in the attic. On my bed. The one Maks always kept fluffed at the foot. I remember it clearly—red, not blue. But every time I tried to describe it, the image shifted. I’d close my eyes and see blue silk, faded by sunlight. I thought I was losing my mind.” Her breath hitches. “But I wasn’t. It was him.”

“Cthaoc?” Kristian’s voice drops, the name sounding like a curse.

“The Lord,” Greta corrects, her tone reverent and trembling all at once. “He changed it. Not the pillow—my memory of it. He slipped into the edges of things, into the quiet corners of recollection, and altered what I knew to be true. That’s how he works. Not with fire or force, but with doubt.”

Kristian’s gaze lingered as if his eyes were anchored to a memory only he could see. He stares at her—really at her—but the look is distant, piercing through her like a blade glancing off glass. She knows that look. It is the same one etched into her own reflection when she catches herself in the act of remembering. And then he spoke a sentence he swore Erik he’d never say. “The bearberries—”

Years it took her to unravel the silences, to piece together the frayed edges of his half-answers and her relentless questions. There had been clues, buried beneath ordinary moments: the way he flinched at certain

names, the nights he sat by the window, staring at the stars as though they held his confessions. But she was always a step behind, chasing truths he'd decided to let rot. And yet, Kristian had never once resolved to tell her.

"The bearberries—I remember them now. Mother used to gather them in the fall, their juice staining her hands. That red, that true red—it's real. And the pillow was that red. It always was."

He opens his mouth, but what remains of their time together is swallowed by the heavy, unspeakable air between them. "Gods, how much did you give me?"

Kristian inhaled, the air in his lungs too hot. "It wasn't just that..."

All color drained from her face, and a smirk sat on her lips, like she thought it was a joke. Another cruel joke wrapped in moss so it became more comfortable to digest. "What?" Her chuckle was more of a scoff. "What are you saying?"

Kristian narrowed his eyes, the dim light of the room casting shadows across his features as a swell of sorrow quieted his voice. He didn't want this—never truly wanted it—but the truth had seeped between them like a cold draft, undeniable. "Erik slipped something in every morning," he said, his fingers clenching.

He glanced toward the doorway of the kitchen, where Olivia used to stand back at Erik's, her presence unspoken yet felt. She had, he knew, once hoarded extra oregano to dull the sweetness of whatever Erik had slipped into Greta's tea. A futile attempt to disguise the poison as care, a bitter truth cloaked in the warmth of a shared recipe.

Greta's shoulders trembled at his words. She closed her eyes as if to block out the room itself.

"Greta—" he started, reaching for her arm to steady her, but her hand snapped out in a blur of motion.

A pulse of air followed, and he was sent crashing into the wall, his ribs screaming in protest. He groaned, slumping to the floor, the room spinning as much from the force of the impact as from the weight of her betrayal. But he didn't mind it. He'd betrayed her too.

For a long moment, Greta said nothing. She had never wielded it freely; it had crept into her bones. Now, it surged from her in jagged bursts, a defense mechanism created by years of feeling powerless and betrayed.

Kristian pressed a hand to his bruised side, wincing. "You didn't have to do that," he murmured, though his voice carried no accusation. Only exhaustion.

"You don't get to stand there and talk about him." Greta shot back, her voice cracking. "After what you did. After what you let happen."

Kristian had been complicit in the quiet, the unspoken agreement to let Erik's guilt fester until it turned to poison. Now, the debts were coming due.

His ribs ached, but the pain was nothing compared to what they had all endured. He reached for her again, slower this time. "Please, listen to me."

"It's me," Greta whispered, the words slipping out as though pulled from her by unseen hands. They weren't planned, weren't rehearsed.

Her voice was barely audible, a frayed thread trembling in the silence, but the impact was seismic. Her eyes widened slightly, as if surprised by her own confession—like someone struck without warning, breath knocked from their lungs by an invisible blow. For the first time in years, she wasn't hiding. She wasn't deflecting.

"I'm the monster." She said, and this time her voice didn't tremble. "I am what I feared. I am what I denied. I am the thing that destroys without meaning to, that breaks what it loves."

Her gaze locked with Kristian's, piercing through the years of denial, the fragile masks, and the careful performances she'd worn like armor. There was no flourish to it, no performative anguish. Only the certainty of revelation. No tears welled in her eyes, and no muscles clenched in rage. Her hands didn't shake, not even when they twitched at her sides, as if instinctively remembering the grip of violence.

Kristian stared at her, the words landing like a physical blow—precise, crushing, and impossible to deflect. He had known Greta for nearly two decades. He had seen her laugh with firelight in her eyes, weep over

poetry, and cradle wounded birds in her palms with a gentleness that bordered on reverence. He had watched her wrestle with grief, with guilt, with a past that shadowed her like a second skin. But he had never seen her like this—exposed.

It wasn't that she said she was a monster. It was that she believed it. And worse—he could not immediately deny it. Not with the ease he expected. Not with the righteous denial that should have sprung forth.

The time she walked away from someone who needed her, not out of spite, but because the weight was too heavy. Were those monstrous acts? Were they monstrous acts because she was a monster? Or were those monstrous acts because she was... human? Whatever that meant.

"No," he began, his voice rough, unsteady, "You're not a monster. You're—"

"I am!" screamed Greta, and the sound tore through the room like a car crash. The color drained from her eyes—not metaphorically, but literally. She squeezed her eyes shut, but it did nothing to contain the pain. A jagged sob tore from her throat, raw and animal, the sound of someone who had spent too long holding their breath.

"Don't you see this?" she pleaded, her voice cracking. "Don't you see what I am? Look at me, Kristian. Look."

And he did. He looked at the woman who he had once held through panic attacks, who had memorized the constellations to point them out to him on quiet nights, and who had stitched up his wounds—both physical and emotional—without wanting anything in return. He looked at the woman who had also lied, manipulated, abandoned, and destroyed—not out of cruelty, but out of a terrifying self-preservation that blurred the line between survival and sin. He looked at the woman he saw growing up—like a little sister—and he wanted nothing more but to hold her, to tell her how sorry he was. But he wasn't sorry.

And in that moment, he understood what she meant. She wasn't calling herself a monster because she'd done terrible things. She was calling herself a monster because she recognized them. Because she had faced the darkness within and refused to look away. Because she refused to cower.

“Punch me,” she said suddenly, her voice low, broken.

Kristian recoiled. “What?”

“Hit me!” she shrieked, stepping forward, shoving him hard in the chest. “Just get angry for once! Say I’m lying! Tell me I’m wrong! Scream at me!”

And she hit him again, fists beating against his chest with a desperation that had nothing to do with violence and everything to do with need. She wasn’t trying to hurt him. She was trying to wake him. To wake herself. She wanted fury, judgment, anything that felt real. She wanted proof that their world still worked with sins.

But Kristian didn’t strike back. He didn’t push her away. Instead, he caught her wrists, gently, and when she collapsed against him—sobbing violently, her body wracked with grief not for what she’d done, but for what it meant about who she was—he held her.

He held her as the storm passed. He held her as the silence returned. And in that silence, something shifted. Not forgiveness—because that word was too small. Not absolution, which meant she needed saving. But witnessing. Kristian saw her. Fully. Terribly. And in seeing her, he did not flinch.

He knelt, his fingers finding a faint, thready pulse at her throat. Relief warred with a rising tide of panic. Gently, he gathered her limp form into his arms, the sheer weight of her a terrible demonstration of her condition. "I'm sorry," he whispered, the words a raw prayer of regret against her hair. "This is the only way."

He carried her out into the biting night air, crunching across frosted grass toward the hulking, corrugated metal shape that served as Maks’s workshop.

"You shouldn't have come," Maks stated, his voice low and gravelly. He didn't move to help, his gaze fixed on the unconscious woman in his arms.

"I had nowhere else to go," Kristian pleaded, shifting Greta’s weight. "You're the only one who can help her. Please."

“None of us wants to help her, Kristian.”

Maks' words hit him with full force, a slap to the face, and Kristian recoiled. He stared at him, mouth half open. And knew he was right. “But we don’t want to lose her.”

Maks pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re like this because you worked for the heathen.”

“Erik wasn’t a heathen,” says Kristian, his voice steadfast. “He was a father who loved his daughter and didn’t think clearly.”

“And that’s the problem. Why do you think I sent Ben over there?”

“So she defends herself. So she is prepared.”

Kristian knows what he is saying. “So she dies.” He says it. Says it because Maks wouldn’t.

With a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of a dozen similar failures, Maks stepped to the container and heaved the door open. The interior was sterile and cold, bathed in the stark blue glow of monitoring equipment. "Lay her down," he instructed, his tone all business. As Kristian carefully placed Greta on the cold ground.

Maks shook his head. "She could have killed you back there."

"But she didn’t. She is terrified, Maks," he insisted, his voice cracking with desperation.

Maks turned to face him, his expression unflinching. "No. She isn’t. Not anymore."

Horror twisted in Kristian's gut; he didn’t dare look at her or look away from her. "There has to be another way."

"Maybe." Maks conceded, gesturing to the mattress. "But I'll be honest, I don't like the odds." He looked from the pale girl on the cot to the desperate man standing over her, his own jaw setting. "The choice is yours. Do we proceed, or do you let her go?"

Kristian unfastened the last button of his worn leather vest with deliberate slowness, peeling it off his shoulders as if shedding the weight of the day. The weight disgusted him so. “We proceed.”

Without ceremony, he flung it into the dark corner of the shipping container, where it landed with a muffled thud beneath a stack of crates. The dim glow of a single overhead bulb cast long shadows across the rusted

walls, illuminating the still figure of Greta on the thin mattress. She lay curled beneath a tattered blanket, her breathing steady, peaceful—almost innocent in sleep. For a moment, Kristian allowed himself to watch her, the tension in his jaw softening. There was a quiet strength in her stillness, a reminder of why they had come this far.

The heavy metal door groaned open, and Maks stepped inside, boots clanging against the corrugated floor. In one hand, he held a coil of thick rope, its fibers frayed but unyielding. His expression was unreadable, practical. He didn't speak—he didn't need to.

Kristian turned slowly to face him, his eyes narrowing, the warmth from moments before freezing over into something dangerous.

"No," he said. His voice was low but final. "We don't chain her up. She's not an animal."

Maks hesitated, studying Kristian's face as if measuring the sincerity behind the words. "I don't want her to hurt herself."

Kristian shook his head. "She won't."

The rope remained coiled in his grip, but he didn't move toward the mattress. After a tense pause, he gave a curt nod and tossed the rope onto the ground.

Exhaustion finally won, and Kristian slid down the steel wall of the container, coming to rest on the gritty floor. In the dim, echoing silence, his gaze was drawn to the faded object encircling his wrist.

It was a bracelet Greta had woven for him what felt like a lifetime ago, a promise of a future that never arrived. Its once-bold red braid had softened to a dusty rose, the thin horizontal stripes of white and blue now little more than ghostly threads. Nestled within the central knot was a single, chipped crimson bead, a flawed little thing she had declared perfect. He traced its worn surface with a thumb, a reminder of a time when her hands were warm and the world felt less like a cage.

The silence inside the container pressed against them like a heavy weight. It smelled of old rust and used air.

Then, the quiet didn't just break—it rotted. A voice came from the other side of the steel wall. It was Elias.

He wasn't screaming; he was just talking, a low and casual sound that made the floor plates tremble. He sounded like a man looking for a misplaced tool, not a person.

Maks went rigid, his breath catching in his throat like a fishhook. He turned his head, a quick motion in the absolute blackness, his eyes searching for a shape he knew was there. "No," he whispered, the word a ragged plea.

"Easy," Kristian's voice was a low hiss from a few feet away.

"No, no, no..." Maks's whisper was laced with panic. "That's him. Outside." He shifted, the scuff of his boots on the metal floor deafeningly loud. "Did he see you? Tell me he didn't see you."

"Impossible," Kristian shot back; his eyes flickered toward Greta, and he knelt down beside her. His hands rummaged through her pockets until he found the sigil he had given her earlier. He pocketed it himself, afraid it would burn her raw. "I was a ghost. He was halfway across the yard. The man doesn't have eyes in the back of his head."

"But what if he does?" Maks's voice cracked. "You don't know what he is, what he can do. One glimpse, one shadow in the wrong place, and he knows something is wrong." The air grew colder, or perhaps it was the ice flooding their veins.

The implications unfolded like a black flower in the darkness. If Elias was here, calling out, it wasn't a coincidence. It was a hunt.

A low, terrifying certainty settled in the pit of Maks's stomach. "If he saw you," he breathed, "He doesn't just know something is wrong. He knows everything."

The air inside the shipping container was thick with the scent of mildew and cold sweat, the only light a flickering bulb overhead casting long, wavering shadows. Kristian pushed himself up and stepped carefully across the warped metal floor, his boots scraping like fingernails on stone.

Greta lay on a thin mattress in the corner, curled into herself, her breath shallow, almost imperceptible. He walked to the other corner of the room, pacing nervously before walking back to her.

He knelt beside her, the rusted surface biting into his knees, and reached out to gently shake her shoulder.

"Margareta," he whispered, voice frayed at the edges. "We need you. Now."

"What the hell are you doing?" Maks snapped, lunging forward to grab Kristian's arm, his grip iron-tight. Panic flared in his eyes. "You don't touch her when she's like this!"

Kristian didn't flinch. He raised a hand, palm outward, and held Maks's stare. "She's the only one who can send him back," he said, low and urgent. "You want to leave her here while it keeps scraping at the walls? While it learns how to get in?" His voice cracked. "Do you really want to risk that?"

Maks hesitated. The sound came again—scratch, scratch, scratch—like claws on steel, beyond the container's outer wall. He released Kristian's arm but didn't step back, muscles tensing.

Kristian turned back to Greta. This time, he brushed his fingers along her forearm, light as a moth's wing. "Margareta, sweetheart," he said again, softer. "It's time. You have to wake up."

Her body twitched. A shudder ran through her like electricity. Then, slowly, her eyelids fluttered open.

His breath caught.

Her eyes—once a soft moss—were still milky white, devoid of pupil or iris, reflecting the dim light like a blind animal's. They stared, unblinking, into the middle distance, as if looking right through the metal of the container, seeing something far beyond the rusted walls, beyond this world, beyond possibility.

Kristian recoiled, falling backward onto the cold floor, his pulse hammering in his throat. He scrambled to push himself up, eyes darting to Maks, who stood frozen, his face drained of color.

Then—silence.

The scratching stopped.

For a heartbeat, the container was utterly still.

And then Greta sat up.

Not with the grogginess of someone waking, but with a sudden, rigid fluidity, like a puppet yanked upright by unseen strings. Her head tilted slightly, the white eyes scanning the room. Her lips parted, but the voice that came out wasn't hers. It was layered—hollow, guttural, echoing as if spoken from the bottom of a well.

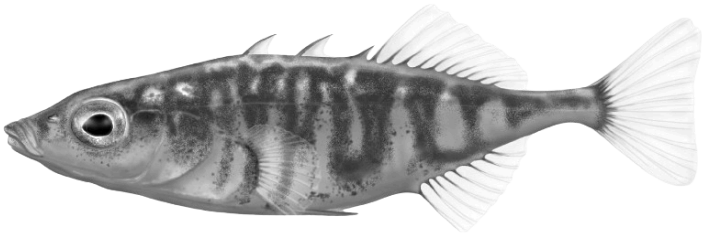
"He's listening," she whispered, but the voice wasn't hers.

Outside, something heavy dragged across the gravel.

Maks backed toward the door, hand fumbling for the bolt. But Kristian didn't move.

He stared at Greta—at the thing wearing her skin—and understood with cold certainty: waking her hadn't brought salvation.

It had opened the door wider.



The Farmer in the Dell

Chapter 15 Greta

Trust not the shepherd for he loves only the wool upon thy back and the meat upon thy bones. — Joseph 12:8

Greta remembered when she used to beg Ben to kill her before she knew it wasn't possible. She was not aware back then. Of what she was. She'd thrash at him until her nails were bloody welts on his body, and

she'd scream at him until the voice in her gave way, until her throat was raw and her cheeks were slick with tears, until she choked on her sobs. At that point, her pulse had pounded so loudly in her head that it didn't feel any different from how she felt at once. She wished she could drop to her knees, wrap her hands around her head, and dig her nails into her scalp to pull out the horns she had been cursed with, tearing at the skin that was so wrongly hers.

In the moment she'd imagined how he lay here, bloodied, dead—Greta's head fell back, the weight of it suddenly too much for her neck to support. She looked up at Kristian, the last spark of defiance catching and dying in her eyes—like a star. A twitch involuntarily fluttered beneath her left eye, a worm digging through the last layer of an apple. The muscles around her nose tightened, her entire face contorting in the familiar buildup to a sob that never arrived. The well was dry.

Kristian always knew what to do after her tantrums in the empty cathedral; he knew to bring her tea. His jaw would clench, but he'd always let her in. She'd rip off her headscarf and throw it against the wall but would still pick it up and fold it neatly. And she would scream at him and beg him, her eyes full of tears, but he'd never raise his voice. To this day, Greta wasn't sure if he could even do it—raise his voice. She believed that even his violence was gentle.

And Kristian, for a flicker of a second, buckled. Greta saw the crack in his armor—the war between his sense of duty and a deep, buried affection for her. For a moment, his expression softened, and he was just a man seeing a woman break. But duty, as always, won.

The steel slammed back into his gaze, the momentary weakness erased as if it had never been. He had chosen his path, and it was not one that led to her.

Greta saw it all. She saw him choose the cold, hard logic over the fragile, bleeding thing between them.

"Tell me you have a plan." Her words were a whisper, stripped of air. She pushed herself upright on the thin mattress on the floor, her spine clicking into a rigid strip of defiance. Her gaze, dry and wide, darted between the impassive Maks and the shuttered man before her. "What happens next? There's a price for this. You

both know there's always a price." Her voice cracked on the last word, a final, damning admission of the terror that had been her silent companion all along.

She looked between the two men, who stared at her like she was a problem instead of family. She couldn't help but involuntarily wrap her arms around her knees, her breath visible in the damp chill of the container's cold.

Above her, Maks stood with his back against the rusted door, his silhouette sharpened by the pale flicker of a dying bulb overhead.

He spoke softly, a rehearsed certainty in his voice: "You have to hit rock bottom before you get better."

Greta let out a dry laugh—not mocking, not cruel, but tired, as if the idea had long since ceased to comfort. She lifted her gaze to him, her eyes sharp again. "After what happened to Mama," she said slowly, "Do you really believe that?"

Maks stiffened. His jaw tightened, a muscle twitching beneath the grime-streaked skin. "This is different," he insisted. "Dagmar was—"

"Sick," Greta interrupted, the word slicing through the air. "You've said it a million times. But then you turn around and tell me the sickness wasn't real."

"That one wasn't," admitted Maks, his voice quieter now, strained. "But Dagmar—she was bipolar. The depressive episodes... they nearly killed her."

Greta frowned, her fingers pressing into her sleeves as if bracing against a cold deeper than the air around them. "Then why didn't you help her?"

"We did," Maks said, the words thick with the weight of memory. "You're the reason she got that bad in the first place."

The silence that followed was heavy, suffocating—a pause lined with unspeakable grief. Greta flinched, but didn't look away. Maks exhaled, his face softening with a sorrow that seemed older than his years. "But I don't blame you," he added, voice cracking slightly. "It's not your fault."

And that was the horror of it—the unbearable contradiction that lived between them. They both carried the truth like a splintered bone: their mother hadn't been sick. She had been haunted. Haunted by visions that weren't hallucinations, by whispers that came from the walls themselves.

Maks had denied it for years, called it delusions, and sought treatments, therapy, and medication. But Greta had seen what he refused to acknowledge—the way the shadows moved when Dagmar screamed, the way the air thickened before the lights went out. It was never that. It was *him*. It had always been him.

Now, sitting there in the ruins of their makeshift shelter, Maks preached recovery and redemption through suffering; he almost sounded like Erik, how he preached the gospel in churches, claiming to be a heathen—yet Greta knew, with a hollow certainty, that hitting rock bottom wouldn't save her. Because they were already beneath it. Beneath the earth, beneath sanity, beneath the fragile fiction that this was another story of mental illness.

The thing wearing her mother's face hadn't died with Dagmar.

It had simply found a new home, and Greta would indefinitely die in this house, but clearly she was the only one concerned enough to voice it.

Maks, leaning against the far wall, attempted a soothing tone that only grated on the nerves. "You have to hit rock bottom before you get better," he said, as if reciting a well-worn proverb.

A laugh tore from Greta's throat, breathy and right from her throat. It was a sound without joy, a rock that tumbled down a mountain. "Bullshit." Her eyes, however, remained fixed on Kristian, unblinking and burning with a cold fire. "Are you not going to say something?"

"What do you want me to say, Margareta?" Kristian's voice broke, the name sounding like a confession. "You know the Lord—"

"I know," she whispered, a tired smile ghosting her lips. "Comes first. But there was a time when I came first. I was the one you came to first."

Those sightless, milky eyes remained fixed on Kristian, yet a light shimmer broke their surface. A single tear

escaped the void of her eye, carving an acidic path through the grim on her cheek. It was a drop of human grief leaking from a vessel that no longer looked human. But she was no vessel after all, was she?

He sat crouched now, staring at the floor. He rubbed his eyes tightly, not with tiredness, but with a kind of despair, as if trying to scour away a vision only he could see.

When Greta spoke again, her voice was low, sharp enough to cut. He flinched but didn't look up. But no word left her lips. So she was forced to watch him, her own dread hardening into a solid, bitter knot in her stomach. She saw the distant, vacant shine in his eyes and knew he wasn't truly there with them. He was a passenger in his own body, already lost to whatever was coming. The betrayal was a physical ache. He had been her anchor, her promise of safety. Now, he was another piece of the wreckage.

Her voice dropped to a venomous whisper, meant only for him. "You said nobody would come to take me. You lied."

"You would have run if we'd told you the whole truth," Kristian said, his tone a maddening blend of condescension and pity.

A humorless laugh ripped from Greta's throat. "Oh, really? Forgive my lack of enthusiasm. I'm sorry if the thought of being a human sacrifice doesn't live up to my dreams." Her voice was the only weapon she had left.

His expression didn't change. "You're like them now. Lis. Dagmar."

The names were ghosts, physical blows that stole the air from her lungs. He watched Greta's mouth fall open, the sudden, ice-cold grief for her friends a far greater pain than any fear for herself. Her gaze darted past Kristian to Maks, who stood by the door, his face an impassive mask. His silent approval was a betrayal deeper than any knife, and a pure hatred for them both curdled in her stomach.

"So what's the plan?" She spat, her voice trembling with rage. "Chain me up down here until the time comes?"

Kristian's chest rose with a heavy sigh, his head shaking slowly. Each word that left him caused him physical

pain. "It doesn't have to be like this."

But it was already too late for that. The pressure that had been building inside her, a waking snake of terror and fury, finally snapped. And instead of protecting her, he'd helped to tighten the rope so it could snap properly and not ripple at the edges like it had with Lis.

Greta didn't throw a punch; she unleashed the air between them. With a scream that sounded like tearing flesh, she thrust her palm forward. Kristian didn't fall; he was erased from his standing. It felt as if the atmosphere had turned into a high-speed train, a blunt force that slammed into his chest and stole the very breath from his lungs.

The world blurred into a streak of motion. He hit the container wall with a dull thud, the kind of sound a body made when it stopped being a person and started to become an object. For a heartbeat, his entire body hummed with a hot, searing agony before his nerves simply went numb.

He crumbled into a heap, his limbs tangling like discarded clothes. In the sudden silence the only sound he heard was Greta's ragged gasps. The air in the room tasted of copper and dry leaves, like the earth had reached out and broken the world just to keep him at bay.

A noise crashed against the outside of the container, but she felt no cold—only the sharp, hollow thrill of what she was about to do.

Maks wasn't a man anymore; he was a ragdoll pinned against the steel ceiling. He hung six feet up, his arms and legs flopping like a trapped rat. His body bounced in a rhythmic, pathetic thud against the metal.

Good, Greta thought. *Let my weight crush the life out of you.*

Her fingers twitched, and Maks mirrored her, his body jerking even higher. Then came a sound that drowned out everything else—the wet, screaming snap of his spine.

Her hand twitched, and Maks's body jerked higher. The sound was deafening—the shriek of his spine and shoulders grinding against the cold, unyielding metal roof. The container groaned, the steel plates bucking under the pressure of a force that shouldn't exist.

"You promised," she spat. Her voice was a ruin, a raw scrape of sound. The pendant at her throat—the heavy, blackened silver Kristian had pressed into her hand—clinked against her collarbone. It felt like a lead weight, a mocking reminder of the "real" one Maks had stolen years ago. She remembered the warmth of a smile that was nothing but a mask. *Trust me,* he'd said.

She'd been a fool, and fools were meant to be bled.

Maks sputtered, his fingers clawing at the invisible noose tightening around his windpipe. "Greta... come to... your senses—"

"Shut up."

She curled her fingers into a white-knuckled fist. The sound followed instantly: the wet, rhythmic **pop** of ribs snapping like dry kindling. Maks's eyes bulged, the vessels in his whites shattering.

Greta screamed—not with pain, but with the surge of a power that felt like a sick parody of the love she'd once craved. His face was slick with sweat and terror. Good, she thought. Feel it.

Her hand twitched, and his body jerked higher, scraping the ceiling. Splinters rained down. The shipping container groaned, metal splintering under the weight of her anger. It rang like a dying bell.

"You promised," she spat, her voice rough, raw. The pendant at her throat clinked against her chest. She remembered his smile, warm and false, as he fastened the real one around her neck. Trust me, he'd said. She'd been a fool.

"Shut up." Her fingers curled. His ribs cracked audibly. He gasped, eyes bulging.

She let him dangle there, toes brushing nothing, and screamed. Her power surged, a sick parody of the love

she'd once believed in. She'd nurtured it, let it grow, until it became this: a weapon.

Maks's body convulsed. She let him fall—an inch, enough to make him scream—and yanked him back up.

But he didn't scream. And she hated it.

"Do you remember the pendant?" she whispered. "The one you stole? The one you broke?" Her nails dug into her palm. "It was Mama's. All I had left from her."

His throat worked, soundless.

A tear slipped down her cheek, hot and acidic. She released him.

He crumpled to the floor, a heap of broken bones and whimpering. The door opened a crack from the wind.

The breeze struck her knees, then her hands, then the rest of her. She didn't wait for her eyes to adjust. She bolted.

Barefoot, she fled over hardened soil that clawed at her soles. The grass was a tangle of needle-sharp blades, tearing into the tender skin of her arches.

She could feel the grit of pebbles, the slick decay of fallen leaves, and the roots digging into her like fingers trying to hold on. It hurt. Everything hurt. But the pain was real. Not the muffled, echoing agony of broken promises, but the raw sting of survival.

The grass thinned, giving way to mud that oozed between her toes, holding her for a moment, as if the land itself wanted to anchor her. She wrenched her foot free, and the mud released with a wet, gurgling sigh.

Every thorn and twig that bit into her flesh was a reminder: she was no longer buried. She was getting herself back, piece by bloody piece.

She didn't dare pause to check her wounds—each step sent shards of pain through her soles, but Maks was out there, and he was closing in. The metal container she'd escaped from still loomed in her rearview.

Now, the world beyond felt no more forgiving. The grass beneath her was hardened, like the fingers of a corpse, grasping at her ankles as she sprinted.

A flock of geese erupted from the tall grass to her left, their honking a chorus of alarm that mirrored her

own. She wove through them, knocking one sideways as it flapped blindly into her shoulder, its weight a useless resistance.

They scattered, wings blurring the air, and she followed their path. Her breath came in ragged gasps, throat raw with the dust of the dried riverbed she'd crossed earlier. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked—not the sharp yip of a house pet, but the howl of something trained to hunt. Maks. He'd have a knife in one hand and an axe in the other, or maybe the same fingers that clutched the blade would grip their holy book. She didn't know which would be worse if he caught her.

The path bent toward a clearing, and that's where she encountered Ada. The girl stood in the center of the empty space, her small frame almost a pit against the gray sky, holding a wooden bucket like a crucifix. Her braids were neat, her pinafore clean, the opposite of Greta's matted hair and blood-streaked arms. Greta skidded to a halt, her movement carrying her halfway to the child before she stopped herself.

Ada's voice was flat as she frowned. "Why aren't you in solitary?"

"You shouldn't trust them."

Ada looks to the side, back to the container where Maks stood. "Trust who?"

"All of them."

"You hurt Maks," she whispered, voice trembling with a mix of grief and accusation. "So why should I believe a single word you say?"

Greta's eyes glistened, raw with regret, her posture slumped as if guilt itself weighed upon her shoulders. "I am sorry." Her voice cracked, not with manipulation, but with the brutal honesty of survival. "I didn't want it to happen—but he came at me first. He tried to hurt me too."

Yet to Ada, it sounded like justification—like an excuse. She shook her head slowly, tears blurring her vision, the bond between them unraveling like thread pulled too taut. "Ben was right." The name was sharp on her tongue. "You are the monster."

Greta flinched, not from anger, but from the weight of being seen as something irredeemable. She wanted to

argue, to explain the fear that had seized her, the split-second choice made in desperation—but the gap was already too wide. In that moment, it wasn't about who started what or who was more justified. It was about trust and how easily it could shatter when blood had been spilled. Horror wasn't in the violence—it was in the realization that the person you once called sister, friend, or lover could become a stranger, capable of unspeakable things.

Ada clutched the bucket tighter, leaning forward. "What did you do?"

Greta's fingers twitched toward the girl's wrist, considering a grab, a distraction, but Ada was ready. Her eyes, a rusty blue that could have been called innocent if they hadn't been so cold, locked onto Greta's.

"You're not the one who can be trusted," Ada said, tilting her chin up. "Running like a beast at sundown. You want their attention, don't you? They'll drag you down, you know," Ada continued, her voice softening like she might pity Greta. "The Lord gave us Maks to keep the chaos from coming in." She nodded toward the horizon, where a faint smoke curled into the sky. "You should've listened."

Greta's hand shot out, shoving Ada backward. The girl's bucket clattered to the ground, apples rolling like marbles through the dead grass. Ada didn't cry out, only pressed her lips into a thin line as Greta lurched forward again. This time, Greta didn't glance back—not at the girl, not at the containers.

The lie in Ada's voice was the worst part: they weren't the chosen ones, and this was no holy mission. Greta had been inside the container long enough to learn the truth—the Lord was another name for hunger, for silence, for the way Maks's voice would grow warm when he said they were "cleansing the weak."

She reached a round pole fence ahead, its wood splintering under her nails. Greta grabbed it, her fingers slipping on the wet wood, and pulled. The wood groaned. Somewhere behind her, feet began to run—Ada's, small and quick, but not hers. The fence gave, and Greta fell through, scraping her belly on the earth on the other side. She didn't care.

She didn't dare look back. The sound, if there was a sound, was less important than the feeling—the cold presence sweeping through the darkness behind her. Her lungs were on fire, each breath a ragged, useless

gasp that did nothing to quell the burning in her chest.

The soles of her feet were the worst. They were no longer part of her; they were a separate, screaming agony. Now, every sharp stone and every hidden root sent a jolt of raw, blistering pain up her legs. The hard, solid earth of the meadow gave way to unforgiving dirt. She was close. She could feel the change in the air, a taste of salt and dampness.

Then, the earth simply vanished. Greta skidded to a halt, her movement sending a spray of loose pebbles tumbling into the void; they didn't hit the bottom; they just disappeared into the dark. Her movements screamed against the grit as she fought for her balance. The cliff. She had made it. Her body sagged, hands on her knees, chest heaving in great, silent sobs.

She straightened up, balancing on the edge, the burning in her lungs finally giving way to a cold, hollow dread. The frantic flight was over. The chase was done.

She was out of breath, cornered, and horribly, terrifyingly still. And from the silent, waiting meadow behind her, they began to close in on her.

Greta steps slowly toward the cliff's edge, the wind of the fjord clawing at her bare feet. Below, the waves didn't crash; they hissed against the stones.

She doesn't flinch. Her heart beats steady, too steady—like it's long forgotten the language of fear.

Memories rise like ghosts. She felt the phantom pain of Ben's fist slamming into her face, the crack echoing in her skull, tilting her into a red blur as her breath was choked off by the taste of her own blood. She'd dropped to the floor, gasping, the world spinning, unable to draw breath. Then Erik—how he'd locked the door and left her inside as flames swallowed the house behind her. She'd screamed his name until her voice broke, until each word burnt a hole into her throat, but he never came back.

But she remembers her own hands too. The cold weight of the pitchfork as she bit it through the ribs of the girl from the willow grove. The way the girl's eyes widened, then went blank. She remembered the snap of the dog's neck, its body limp after she twisted its neck in the dry heat of the barn. And the bird, flapping

weakly in her grip, before she smashed it against the shattered window again and again, over and over, until feathers, blood, and glass clung to her fingers. Her hands bled freely, but she didn't stop.

She did those things. They live inside her, just as much as the wounds Ben and Erik left behind. Pain made her sharp. Fear made her cruel.

The sound of boots on the cracked earth made her head snap around, the memory gone as quickly as it had come.

Kristian came sprinting into view, boots pounding the cracked earth, breath ragged—but his gray eyes were calm. Too calm. Maks followed close behind, arms locked across his chest, his gaze fixed not on the empty drop but on the cliff beyond—like he was measuring the distance of her fall before she'd even taken the step back. He looked fine. Unscathed. It was impossible.

Greta's voice shattered before it could even leave her throat. Her nose stung. Tears spilled, but they weren't from sorrow. They burned with fury. With betrayal.

"You loved me?" she spat, her voice crumbling into a whisper. "You loved me, and you brought me here?"

Kristian stopped feet away. He smiled

It wasn't his smile. Not the one that used to crinkle the corners of his eyes when she

teased him about his coffee obsession or the way she hummed off-key in the shower. No. This was something raw. Twisted. A grimace stretched too wide, like his face wasn't made to hold it.

"I know I loved you," he said softly, his voice carrying a terrifying edge. "I still do. That's why I'm doing this. Love is not a sacrifice, Greta. It's a sanctuary."

Greta shook her head. A choked, hysterical laugh escaped her raw throat. "That makes no sense, Kristian. None. You're talking in riddles while you watch me die!"

She whipped her glare toward Maks. He didn't move. Didn't speak. He stood there, feet rooted to the ground. "And you?" she snapped, turning her glare on him. "You've been quiet this whole time. Why? You always had an opinion before. Where is the judgment you've been holding so high over my head since I was a

child? Where is it? Why this? Why now?"

Maks finally looked at her—but it wasn't pity in his eyes. It was a certainty. Worse than hatred. There was no flicker of the uncle who had once fixed her bike or taught her how to fish. Only finality.

"I'm your mother's brother, that's why. If it were Erik right now, he'd soothe you, lull you into false security. But why would I?" he said, his voice flat. "I know what you are. Your mother would have wanted this."

"The only way to what?" she demanded, stepping back, heel brushing the crumbling edge. Pebbles skittered into the abyss below.

Kristian took a slow step forward. "To save you."

"Save me?" Greta barked, voice cracking. "From what? From life? From you?"

"From yourself," Kristian said. His voice dipped—gentle, almost tender. And that was worse than the smile. "Greta... your father made me promise. Before he died. He made me swear I'd protect you. No matter what."

Her breath hitched. "So what? You're killing me to keep a promise?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm ending you to save you. Can't you feel it? The way the air hums when you're angry? The way the ground trembles under your feet? Last week, the power went out in three blocks when you slammed a door. Two birds dropped dead from the sky when you screamed at Maks."

Greta froze.

"That wasn't me," she whispered.

"Wasn't it?" Maks cut in. "The visions started when you turned five. Just like your mother. Just like your aunt. And look where they ended."

"They were crazy," Greta shot back. "They hurt people!"

"And you haven't?" Kristian's voice was low now. Urgent. "The neighbor's dog? It ripped its own throat out after you passed by. The storm last Tuesday? No weather system within a hundred miles. Just you. Emotions so loud they crack the world."

Greta shook her head harder, tears streaming. "I control it. I manage it."

“Do you?” Kristian stepped closer. “Or are you deluding yourself until the next time you lose it? Until the next town burns because you had a nightmare?”

“I would never—”

“You already have,” Maks snapped. “That fire in Odda, at Erik’s farm? The cornfield? You were angry that day, Greta. You were furious at Kristian.”

She stared at him. “You’re saying I did that?”

“I’m saying,” Kristian said, voice breaking, “that I watched your mother unravel. I saw her tear a man apart with her voice. And then she jumped from this very cliff. She begged your father to stop her before it got worse.”

Greta’s breath came in short, panicked bursts. “Mama didn’t have any.... Powers.”

“That’s true,” Kristian said, his laugh scoffing. “The Lord gave it to her.”

“We are not doomed yet. Agree to it. It will all stop.”

“You don’t stop destiny by murder!”

“It’s not murder,” he said, stepping forward again. “It’s mercy. It’s love. You’re already slipping, Greta. I see it in your eyes. The darkness creeping in. The whispering. You hear them too, don’t you?”

She didn’t answer.

But she did.

Voices. Always whispering. From the walls. From the wind. Not only Cthaoc.

Kristian reached out, gently cupping her face. His thumb brushed a tear. “I love you. That’s why I can’t let you suffer. That’s why I can’t let you become her.”

Greta looked into his eyes—searching for the man she once knew. The one who brought her soup when she was sick. Who kissed her scars and called them beautiful. But all she saw now was resolve. And grief. And something else—fear. Not of her. For her.

“So this is goodbye?” she whispered.

"It's freedom," he said, voice barely audible over the wind.

She pulled back. Turned toward the edge. The void below yawned, endless. Cold.

"I loved you," she said again. Not angry now. Broken.

"I know," Kristian said. "And I'll love you when you're gone. And when I follow you."

Her breath caught. "You're not—"

"I promised your father," he said softly. "I promised him I'd take care of you. And then I'd take care of myself. No loose ends. No living with what I've done."

Silence.

Then, Greta smiled. Not in joy. In understanding.

"You always were a terrible liar," she whispered. But he was right about one thing. There were no loose ends.

Cthaoc had been right. Erik had been right, and even though she dared not admit it, Ben had been right too. And so they had come for her; they had come for the girl with the high fever, they had come for the girl who cradled her piglet at night, and they had come for her. They had *finally* come for her.

And before he could react, she stepped back.

Not forward.

Back.

The ground gave way.

And she fell.

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Chapter 16: Elias

And the heavens did not fall in sorrow but cracked open from the weight of man's ascend. — Markus 11:11

Elias didn't flinch when the ledge finally gave way. As the earth crumbled into the abyss and Greta's scream was cut short by the rush of air, he simply raised a hand. There was no theatrical flash—only the sudden, violent thud of his will slamming into her midair.

Greta jerked to a halt, suspended centimeters below the jagged teeth of the cliff. She dangled over the black fjord, her legs thrashing against the empty sky, her eyes wide with a primal, panoramic terror. For three heartbeats, the world held its breath. Not even the wind dared to move against Elias's cold, empty gaze.

Then, with a casual flick of his fingers, he discarded her.

She was flung sideways like storm-debris, hitting the frost-covered grass with a sickening thud. She gasped, her fingers clawing into the frozen soil, clutching the dirt as if the earth itself might try to reject her again.

Elias looked down, his expression as flat as a grave marker. "Don't fall," he said. It wasn't a warning; it was a command of ownership.

Greta scrambled to her knees, her breath coming in clouds of frost. She stared up at him, the white film of her eyes shivering. "You... how?" she managed to choke out.

He stepped forward, his boots crunching rhythmically on the rime-crusted soil. The faint, cruel smile that had lingered on his lips vanished, replaced by a terrifying blankness. In one motion, his hand clamped around her throat.

He shoved her backward, the impact kicking up a spray of crystalline snow, pinning her to the freezing ground with a grunt that seemed to echo off the distant mountains.

From the edge of the clearing, Kristian watched, as silent and immovable as the dark water below. Elias turned his glittering gaze toward him, his eyes alight with a sharp, predatory amusement.
"Funny, isn't it, Kristian?" His voice was a low, melodic rasp. "You spent a lifetime trying to save her soul, and yet... you're the one who led her right to the butcher's block."
Greta spat a short, hollow laugh—a sound that splintered before it could hide the terror vibrating in her chest. "I wouldn't have died," she snarled, her fingers digging into the frost-bitten dirt until her nails bled. "I

know what I am. I wouldn't have broken."

Elias's grin widened, a jagged flash of white in the gloom. "A bold claim for a girl who was just kicking at the clouds," he muttered.

His hand slid from her throat to her wrists in a blur of motion. He yanked her arms upward, pinning them against the frozen earth above her head with a force that felt like iron bands. As he did, the wind let out a sudden, rhythmic howl, as if the night itself were synchronized with her heartbeat.

The world narrowed to the crushing pressure of his grip and the stinging bite of ice against her cheeks. Beyond Elias's shoulder, Kristian remained a fixed, unmoving silhouette—a statue of a man whose only sign of life was the way his eyes tracked every shudder of her body.

Then, a sharp, heavy crack echoed from the darkness behind them. It wasn't a branch—there was nothing left here to grow—but the sound of ancient stone yielding under an impossible weight. The ledge groaned, and the air grew colder still, thick with the scent of wet earth and the metallic tang of the entity waking up between them.

Greta's breath fogs the space between them, each inhale a reminder that life still clings to her throat. She can hear the faint thud of his heart, the wet slap of his hand against the ground, and the chuckle that rises from deep within him.

"It was always going to end like this, wasn't it?" she breathes, her voice flat, hollow. "It ends with me. That's what Cthaoc said."

He snarls. "No. It didn't have to. But your father... your ungrateful father made sure of it." His fingers dig into her wrists, pinning them above her head. "You had everything handed to you. All he asked was that you let him close. But you—" he spits the word like venom. "You're all paupers. Scavenging for scraps of a life he tried to give you."

Greta's lips twist into a bitter smile. "And yet I trusted you," she whispers. "But it wasn't you, Elias. It was never you."

For a moment, his grip falters. His eyes—too dark, too deep—narrow. “You didn’t trust me,” he hisses. “You lied. You thought you were smarter than me. Than him.” His nails bite into her skin, drawing blood. “You really want to know who I am?” He leans closer, his breath hot and rancid against her neck. “I’ll show you.”

He forced the vision into her mind—not as a story, but as a sensory assault. It burned like cold fire against her retinas, a phantom weight pressing into her skull until the air in the shipping container felt thin and tasted of copper.

Greta didn't just see the memory; she drowned in it.

Lotta stood there, a small, fragile thing reaching only to his hip. Her red-dotted sweater was dusted with waffle crumbs, and her stuffed rabbit was clutched against her chest like a talisman. Elias stood over her, his face a mask of glistening, thick scarlet.

“You’re all red!” Lotta chirped, tilting her head with a curiosity that twisted the knife in Greta’s gut. “You’ve got jam on your face again, Papa.”

Elias swallowed, his throat clicking like dry bone. The gun in his hand was an anchor, dragging him toward the floor. Behind him, the house was a tomb; his wife lay slumped in the kitchen, a ruin of the woman he had loved.

“Can I help?” Lotta stepped closer, her bare feet silent on the linoleum. She reached out, her tiny fingers brushing his sleeve. In the flicker of her wide eyes, Elias saw the mother's reflection—lifeless and cooling. The rabbit’s torn ear dangled. “You need a bandage. Do you want me to get one?”

He raised the iron sights.

Lotta didn’t recoil. She saw the man who read her stories, the man who chased the monsters from under her bed. She didn't know the monster was the one holding her hand.

“Please,” he whispered, the barrel of the gun trembling against her small shoulder.

Her brow furrowed, her innocence a shield he was about to shatter. “Papa—?”

“Turn around, Lotta. Look at the flowers on the windowsill. Sing your song.”

“But Papa... there are no flowers.”

“It’s okay, baby,” he choked out, the world blurring. “Just pretend there are.”

The crack of the gunshot was a mercy the world didn't deserve.

The vision splintered like ice under a hammer. The red on his face was joined by the red pooling across the floor, soaking into the rabbit’s fur. Elias stepped back into the real world, his hands slipping from Greta’s wrists as if the skin had turned to ash. He recoiled, his eyes locked on her, waiting for the scream, the horror, and the judgment.

But Greta didn't flinch.

She simply sighed. A long, weary exhale that sounded like a grave closing.

“You killed them,” she said, her voice a flat, dead calm that was more terrifying than any accusation. “Your daughter. Your family. You broke the world before it could break you.”

She couldn’t like him. She had to see him as the villain. He had to be her villain.
And like he was always programmed to, he lied to her. “Yes.”
He could almost read the pity in her eyes—if it was pity at all. When she lifted her gaze again, the feeling vanished, replaced by a cold, hollow stare. “I killed mine, too.”
“Because they deserved to die?” It was a question, but it needed no answering; he knew the story. He knew all of it.

Greta hesitated, her head shaking. “My sister deserved it. Lis was never worthy.”

Elias’s face contorts, his features shifting as if something beneath his skin is writhing. “No.” His voice was a low whisper. “No, she wasn’t.”

“They held me down,” she whispered, as if remembering it all, eyes wide, trembling. “Ben did. My father did. They all said it was for my own good.” He remembers how she looked at him then—not with hope, not with trust, but with something worse: desperation. Like a cornered animal choosing which bite will hurt least.

“But you,” she said, fingers curling into his sleeve. “You won’t hold me back, will you?”

Elias, heart hammering, nodded. Said yes. Said he’d help. Said he wouldn’t hurt her.

She still didn’t know he lied.

The truth is, he wanted to believe. When she spoke of shadows moving on their own, of breath on her neck when no one was there, of whispers in the walls that only she could hear—he told himself it was trauma. Grief. Her father’s strictness, Ben’s controlling grip disguised as love. He thought he was rescuing her. Not because he cared about her but because it was an easy addition to what he was going to do. Get the girl. Save her, too. It sounded good enough.

Then it hit Greta like a knife to the chest. “Herregud,” she whispered, stepping back. “A prophet came. Not a priest. A boy with golden hair, moss-stained hands, and a voice like thunder. You said that. You meant yourself.”

Elias smiled—a slow, crooked crack in his face that didn’t crinkle his eyes. “Took you long enough.” His voice was quiet, almost casual. “I was starting to think you’d never figure it out.” There was no pride in his tone, only disappointment.

“You thought it was all a metaphor.” His eyes gleamed. “Signs and omens. But every word was a promise. And I always keep my promises.”

Greta shook her head and tried to stand up, but roots snuck up between the cracks, winding around her ankles. Elias rolled off of her, gentle as a butterfly, terrible as the grave.

"Greta," he said, his voice a whisper that echoed too loudly in the silence. "You didn't go with Him last year."

She backed away, her breath sharp. "I said no. I refused."

"Refused?" Elias tilted his head, the smile stretching. "After all He gave you? The visions. The miracles. The power to heal with a touch, to calm the dying with a word. You called on Him in your darkest hour, and He answered. You took from Him... and then you spat in His face."

"I took nothing," she whispered. "I only—"

"You took everything," Elias hissed, stepping closer. The air thickened, sour with the stench of wet earth and rot. "Faith is a covenant, Greta. A bargain. Your father asked for your salvation, and the Lord offered you divinity. But you turned away. You called His gift an abomination. You called me a liar."

"I saw what it did to the others," she said, voice roaring. "They weren't blessed—they were eaten. Their eyes, their minds... gone. I saw the truth behind His love."

"Truth?" Elias laughed—a whip in the echo. "There is no truth but the end. And you denied it, Polly. Disappointed Him. Do you know what it does to a god... when He is disappointed?"

She tried to speak, but her tongue felt heavy and swollen. Her limbs stiffened.

"That's why I'm here," Elias whispered, now inches from her face. His breath smelled of incense and decay. "To reclaim what is His. Not your soul—He doesn't want that anymore. Not after you tainted it with doubt. No... He wants what you were promised. The power. The connection. The door is through you."

"They're... with the Lord now," Alma murmured, the words dripping like poison into the silence. "Fuel for the fire. Like we'll all be, eventually."

A pained whimper ripped from Greta's throat as Elias forced another jagged sliver of memory into her mind. She pressed her palms to her temples, gasping for air that felt like needles in her lungs. "The Apostles," she wheezed, her white eyes fixing on Elias. "That's what you call yourselves? A cult of ghosts?"

Elias stepped closer, his gaze dissecting her as if she were already on the slab. "We are His enforcers," he said, his voice dropping to a reverent chill. "Eight were chosen to ensure the Lightbringer fulfills her purpose."

"Satan's little army?" Greta shot back, her voice cracking even as the darkness in her eyes deepened. "What about the others? Did you kill all of them?"

"He did. They're... with the Lord now," Alma murmured, the words dripping like poison into the silence. "Fuel for the fire. Like we'll all be, eventually."

A pained whimper ripped from Greta's throat as Elias forced another memory into her mind. She pressed her palms to her temples, gasping for air that felt like needles in her lungs.

Elias stepped closer, his gaze dissecting her as if she were already on the slab. "We are His enforcers," he said, his voice dropping to a dawning chill. "Eight were chosen to ensure the Lightbringer fulfills her purpose."

Paul chuckled, low and scornful. "Too much credit, really," he said. "We're just janitors. Sweeping up the wreckage when your work is done."

Alma raised a hand, her fingers trembling—not with fear, but anticipation. "I couldn't speak before the Lord found me," she said, her voice shifting again, now a chorus of whispers. "Do you know what He does to those who resist?"

Elias looked at Greta now, who stood motionless, arms tightly crossed as if bracing against a cold only she could feel. Her eyes flickered toward Maks—not with curiosity, but with a hollow recognition that made Elias's skin crawl. Each glance was too slow.

Her words were not like the betrayal she felt hours ago; now they were calm, almost apathetic. "You knew it all."

Elias turned to Maks, whose smile had dulled into something hollow—tired, yes, but wrong, like a mask stitched in place.

"This was never for your father, Greta," he said, voice soft, almost tender. "Truth is, I was never much of a fan... of him." The air thickened. "Dagmar and I, we truly believed. But Erik... he was never convinced."

Maks raised his hand, not in protest, but in eerie agreement—fingers too long, joints bending the wrong way.

"He doubted," Maks whispered, its voice layered. His voice was a chorus of dead people. "Doubt is fatal."

Maks' voice steadied as he spoke. Greta's birth, he says, split the world like a splinter—Satan's essence seeping through, gnawing at the edges of reality. For years, he tried to unravel the truth, but her mind recoiled from the rot he named. Now, her parents' deaths were not grief but keys, turning locks he didn't know were there. They had waited. Not for sin, or time, but for her. Their blood now cold, the veil frays—his shadowed words coil around her.

"You're the anchor. It sounds nicer, doesn't it?" Elias's hand settled on Greta's shoulder like a cold, iron clasp, and he watched the steel in her jaw tighten.

Her eyes, dark and feral, flickered over him as though she could wrench his throat from his own skull; a thin, involuntary grin split his features

"You and I can change the world, Greta," he whispered, his voice so steadfast.

Greta scoffed, her head shaking, but Maks raised a gloved hand, silencing her. "Let him speak," he intoned, his tone an echo that seemed to vibrate through the fjord's mist-cloaked cliff.

Elias tilted his head, then gestured toward the abyss. "Humans are weak—nothing but insects to be devoured by true evolution. We will remake them, one at a time. After the world has swallowed them."

“You want to rebuild the world?” she asked. She didn't look at him; her eyes were busy tracing the jagged drop of the cliffside.

Elias sucked in a sharp breath, the sound like a knife cutting through the cold. “Are you going to jump again?”

Greta shook her head slowly. “No.”

She turned away from the edge, her boots crunching on the loose rock as she began the walk down. The descent from the fjord was a blur of sharp stone and silver mist. Behind them, the Apostles followed in a line, their shapes flickering in and out of the fog like a funeral procession that refused to bury its dead. By the time the farmhouse groaned into view, the moon had been swallowed by a bruise-colored sky.

“Good.” Elias smiled, his teeth gleaming in the pre-dawn gloom as if she’d offered him a prayer. “Not only this world, Greta,” he murmured, his hand trailing over a rusted farm implement as they crossed the yard. “Everything. We reclaim it all.”

The front door didn't just open; it surrendered. The hinges shrieked like a chant as Elias shoved his way inside, his palm slick with sweat where Greta’s cold fingers clung to his sleeve.

The living room was a graveyard of their former lives. Dust danced in the air, caught by the flickering overhead light. A chair lay upturned; the coffee table was a splintered ruin of oak—scars of the night Greta had first seen the *Other* in the mirror and tried to claw her way out of her own skin.

“Better here than the cliff,” Elias said, his voice ringing with a manic brightness.

He glanced at the framed photo on the wall. In it, Greta was smiling, her eyes still moss green and full of light. It was a souvenir from the time before the shipping container—before he’d been forced to wrap her in plastic and bury her in the dark to wait for the rot to turn into divinity.

He squeezed her hand, his gaze shifting from the photo to the white-eyed creature standing in the center of the room. “Welcome home, Lightbringer.”

Now her eyes darted to the hallway, where a shadowed figure shuffled, waxy and jointed, trailing strands of black sludge down the wall— fingerprints.

“It was either here or the...container,” he repeated, too softly.

Greta’s grip tightened. She remembered the smell of rot in that metal box, the way her reflection had reached back first. She didn’t want to go back.

The doors slammed shut with a deafening clang, the heavy shutters crashing into place as if some unseen fist had slammed them closed. A flicker of fluorescent light sputtered across the cramped hallway.

Beyond the narrow windows, the sky had bled into an angry, glowing red—an omen that made the air taste metallic. Inside, the scent of lemons mingled with the faint, sweet stink of rusted steel and blood, the perfect backdrop for what was about to unfold.

Ada lunged forward from the other entrance, her sneakers squeaking on the polished concrete, eyes locked on Greta’s silhouette at the far end of the room. “Greta! We have to get out—” she shouted, voice cracking under the strain.

Before she could reach the other girl, Kristian stood between them, his hand gripping Ada’s elbow like he was going to break it.

“Don’t move,” Kristian hissed, his breath a cold whisper against her ear. “You’re not leaving until we settle this.”

Ada’s pulse hammered against her temples, but before she could plead, Elias stepped into the flickering light. He lifted a gaunt, trembling hand, and as the light surged one final time, his fingers closed around Ada’s neck. A sickening crack echoed through the hall, followed by a gurgled gasp that died in a splatter of crimson. Blood surged outward, splashing the windows in a grotesque blob that turned the already red sky into the mirror of the house.

The room fell into a sudden, gruesome silence, broken only by the ragged breathing of the remaining three. Elias turned his attention to Greta, his face a mask of unnerving calm. He grasped her wrist with a grip that seemed to crush bone, tilting his head to the side as if studying a curious insect.

"No worries." His voice was a sigh. "I can bring her back later. But now can we talk like proper adults?"

Greta's eyes narrowed, teeth grinding onto another. "What...more... what do you want?"

Elias smiled, a thin, cruel curve of the lips that never reached his eyes. "I want the truth, Polly. I want to know why Erik kept you hidden. Why he never let anyone see you for you." He squeezed tighter, the blood seeping through his fingers, staining his knuckles a dark, glossy crimson.

Kristian stepped forward, his own hands trembling. "You're not listening. It's not about her. It's about the pact we made—"

"The pact?" Greta choked, her voice cracking as another surge of light threw Elias's shadow against the blood-stained windows. "Lis already died for it, Kristian. She already died."

Her chest heaved now; an angry breath surged from her throat. "What more do you want?"

The shutters groaned, the building shuddering as if the very walls recoiled from the answer. A distant, guttural moan rose from beyond the red sky, a sound that seemed to echo in every crevice of the room. The lights flickered again, faster now.

Elias's head whipped around, tracking a sound from the rafters before his gaze snapped back to Greta.

"Calm down!" His voice was a ragged snarl, stripped of its usual calculation. "Before you do something you're going to regret—something you can't undo."

He released her wrists. The pressure vanished so abruptly that Greta stumbled back, her boots skidding on the grit-strewn floorboards. She stared out through the remains of the kitchen window toward the crimson horizon.

"We... we have to stop this," she managed, her voice hoarse and trembling. "If we don't let it go now—"

“You already have,” Kristian whispered.

He wasn't looking at her. He was staring at the windows, where the blood from their struggle had begun to move on its own, tracing the cracks in the glass and painting the world in a shade of horror that felt like a permanent stain.

Kristian stood alone at the far end of the hall, his back pressed against a rusted steel support column that felt like the only thing keeping the ceiling from collapsing. The faint, frantic thrum of his own heartbeat was louder than the rhythmic *drip-drip-drip* of a leaky pipe somewhere in the walls. He could feel the weight of unseen eyes pressing against him from the corners of the room, but when he turned his head, there was only the hollow darkness and the smell of wet earth rising from beneath the floorboards.

“That's right,” says Elias, his voice a low rasp that seemed to scrape the very walls, and he looks at Kristian again. The dim light catches the glint of Elias’s eyes, reflecting nothing again—pure white. “Which means...?”

Elias steps closer, the distance between them shrinking to a breath. Kristian does not back away; the muscles in his legs are locked, his shoulders rigid with a dread that has become almost familiar. After all, why would he? If anyone believed in all of this, it was him. The memory of the night he first heard the whispers—those eldritch murmurs that promised power in exchange for a soul—glimmered behind his eyes like a dying hope.

“Which means...,” Elias repeated. His tone was a silken whisper now, sliding beneath Kristian’s skin like a needle. “Come on. A little cooperation here.”

He came to a stop directly in front of him. His hand hovered in the space between them for a heartbeat, a predatory hesitation, before he pressed a single, cold finger against the center of Kristian’s chest—right over his hammering heart.

The contact was freezing—a numbing, necrotic chill that bled through Kristian’s shirt and spiderwebbed through his ribs.

“We don’t need you anymore,” Elias said. The words didn't just hang in the air; they felt like a sentence had passed.

Suddenly, the invisible pressure behind Elias’s finger exploded. Kristian was ripped from his feet, his body propelled backward with the force of a gale. He didn't just fall; he was **launched**. He struck the hallway wall with a crack like dry kindling, but the force didn't stop there. An invisible hand seemed to catch him mid-rebound, dragging him violently across the floorboards and hurling him through the doorframe into the kitchen.

He slammed into the far wall with a sickening, hollow thud. The impact rattled the rafters, shaking the bundles of dried flowers hanging overhead. Petals from dead poppies and blackened sunflowers rained down on him like funeral ash.

As he slumped to the floor, he felt the crunch of ceramic. Mugs scrawled with clumsy, childish drawings of suns and lopsided smiling faces—relics of a girl who no longer existed—shattered beneath his weight. He tried to push himself up, his breath a ragged wheeze, but the sharp ceramic shards bit deep into his palms, pinning his hands to the floor with his own blood.

From the hallway, Greta’s scream tore through the house, only to be cut short by a sound like a door slamming shut in a vacuum.

Elias lingered in the doorway, neck twisted at an unnatural angle, his head tilting like a broken doll’s. A faint smile curled his lips. "Tossed you a bit far," he said, voice smooth, almost amused. "Sorry."
Kristian wavered—then snatched the knife from his belt and hurled it. It plunged deep into Elias’s thigh with a sickening thud. Blood darkened the fabric... then stopped. Elias looked down, amused, and yanked the blade free and fell onto one knee.

A ragged gasp tore out of him, sounding like it hurt. "Oh no," he whispered. Then, his face twisted into a sharp, ugly grin as he looked at Kristian. "I'm just kidding."

The wound didn't just heal; it erased itself. The flesh zipped shut like time was running backward—too smooth, too fast, and perfectly silent.

"Oh," he said, stepping closer, the knife now in his own hand, glinting with something not quite blood. "You didn't know that, right?" His smile stretched too wide.

Elias's breath hitched as Kristian's eyes searched for Greta. Without waiting for his answer, he stretched out his hand, and Kristian was flung backward; this time, he didn't hit the wall.

Instead, Kristian's arms suddenly froze in place as he was held back by an invisible force. He writhes, his head twisting, trying to move his muscles. As he stares down, Elias is on his feet again, his hands held out, focusing on Kristian.

His eyes are solid white, but while ash scatters around them, he remains calm. He slowly lowers his head and shuts his eyes and then curls his hands into fists. His arms violently snap, his leg twists in an unnatural angle that forces his mouths open wide in a gasp

Then Elias uncurls his hand, and Kristian stills and then drops. Dead.

Greta's scream tore through the silence like glass, raw and desperate. Life drained from Kristian's eyes in an instant, his body collapsing like a puppet with severed strings.

Greta's scream shattered the silence like a hammer to glass—raw, jagged, and thick with a desperation that clawed at the walls. Kristian's eyes, once full of tragic resolve, were now hollow glass.

She lunged toward him, her heart hammering against her ribs, but Maks was there. Her uncle's arm locked around her torso like a band of cold iron, his strength unyielding as he hauled her back. Greta thrashed against him, sobbing, her nails clawing at the air as if she could reach into the void and drag Kristian's spirit back into the room.

Then, with a thought born of pure panic, she reached out—not with her hands, but with something deeper,

darker. A shard of broken glass levitated from the floor, trembling in the thick, blood-tinged air. With a final, guttural cry of anguish, she hurled the shard. It didn't fly; it launched like a bolt of lightning, plunging into the side of Elias's neck.

Elias staggered, a guttural groan escaping his lips. His face twisted—eyes rolling, jaw clenched—as if something monstrous writhed beneath his skin. But then, slowly, unnaturally, he raised his hand. His fingers hovered over the shard, and with a faint pop, it ejected itself, clattering to the floor. Blood welled, dark and glistening, but only for a second. His thumb swept across the wound—and the flesh knitted itself together, seamless, as if the injury had never been.

Maks lets go of her and Greta staggers backwards, her hand outstretched before her like a warning as she falls, landing on the ceramic. Her hand right on top of the floral design, right upon the white.

Elias heaves, eyes drilling into her, his mouth desperate for air. "Really?"

A pained sigh escaped him, but there was no weakness in it—only the terrible calm of something that couldn't be killed. "You're going to understand, eventually," he whispered, his voice like gravel and grave dirt. His chin jerked toward Krsitian. "Don't worry about him. Really, don't."

A desperate flutter came from nowhere and everywhere at once. A moth—the large Yellow Underwing's wings, a leaf of fractures—had become a captive in the shattered glass jar, its tiny body trapped between two panes of transparent steel. It beats against the invisible walls, each thump a tiny gasp for freedom that echoed like a warning bell in the air.

Elias crouched beside Greta, his shadow stretching long and jagged across the cracked stone floor.

She trembled, not from fear but rage—her body heaved as she spat a hot, crimson-tinged wad at his face.

Elias flinched, wiping it away with the back of his hand, his expression twisting between amusement and something far colder. "I have something for you," he murmured.

From his coat pocket, he drew Sunna's Wheel—a relic forged from blackened iron and threaded with what looked like a gold artifact. It was a spherical object, constructed from interlocking gold bands, some bearing

text of the book. The bands intersected at varying angles, creating a three-dimensional structure when twisted. It shifted faintly, as if begging to be opened. "You don't need protection anymore, right?" he whispered, tilting his head with curiosity.

Greta gagged, her voice raw from screaming. "I'm going to kill you."

Elias' laugh was dry. "Ja?"

He rolled the Wheel between his fingers, and the shadows around them deepened, slithering like branches along the walls. "Tried it myself, really. Doesn't work. Funny thing—being the Lord's prophet. Death just... slides off. Not that I care." Elias' smile widened, baring teeth too wide. "But you? You don't need it anymore. Consider it a token."

In the half-lit hallway, Greta's breath came out in sharp, ragged bursts as she slammed her fist into Elias's jaw, the crack echoing like a gunshot.

He touched his face, fingers pressing along the bone like he was adjusting a loose shelf. Then, with a grinding sound, he shifted it back into place.

"You shouldn't have done that," he whispered, voice too deep, too layered—like more than one person speaking.

Greta's shoes slipped on the slick, blood-spattered tiles as she lunged toward Kristian. Elias could almost hear the hammering of her heart. "Really, after all he did to you? You run to HIM?" Elias hissed, his voice low.

He stepped forward, eyes glinting with a cold, unnatural light, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "He isn't dead," he whispered.

But Greta didn't react.

Elias's sigh drifts through the dim attic like a dying breath, and his head shakes with a weary disappointment. "You know, I'm disappointed you didn't catch the mirror trick," he murmurs.

All it took was one word. And she froze. "Mirror trick?" Greta's voice was a whisper, the words seeming too carefully chosen.

Across the room, Elias chuckled ironically, his brows knotting tighter. “In the bathroom? And in your bedroom? You didn’t see it, did you?” he murmured, voice like rusted hinges. “The way the glass twisted—your real self peeling back, layer by layer.”

She scoffed, back straightening. “I don’t—”

“Liar.”

“I tried to show you. How the reflection dies first... then the body follows. But you—” His lip curled. “—You refused to look.”

The bulb died. In the dark, his laughter echoed. “Now it’s too late.”

Greta’s scoff was venomous, a hiss that seemed to seep into the tiles. “Go to tell.”

A sudden, guttural sigh ripped through the hallway—Elias’s disappointment echoing louder than any scream. The lights flickered, and the reflected faces in the mirror began to smile back, not with happiness, but with hunger.

Elias’s skeletal hand trembled in the dim light. “Are you coming?” His whisper curled like smoke.

A serpent-like hiss slithered from the shadows. Brunost writhed between Greta’s legs, his flesh squelching as he coiled against her trembling thigh. Greta gagged.

“Where?” she forced out, eyes darting to Kristian—or what was left of him, his body now a twisted, blackened husk.

Elias smiled, sharp teeth slicing his lips. “Home with the Lord,” he said, voice dripping syrup-thick. “Where you belong.”

Brunost hissed louder, sharp claws digging into Greta’s skin. She whimpered as the ground beneath Kristian’s corpse began to bloom—thick, writhing roots bursting through, hungry and wet.

As Greta stumbled away from the open door, the farm behind them writhed like a thing alive. Twisted oak limbs clawed at the sky, their bark peeling to reveal pulsing veins of black.

The air thickened, sweet and warm, as stalks erupted from the soil, curling into spirals of thorned vines.

Flowers—vivid, impossibly bright—bloomed in unison, their petals glistening with sticky dregs. One petal drifted through the air, landing at her feet; its edges were charred and frayed, less like a plant and more like the rim of an open wound.

But when she turned, their stems followed, whiplashing toward the fleeing figures. The valley hummed as the blossoms snapped shut, jaws of velvet and teeth. The wind carried a low, ragged sigh that curled around her neck, urging her forward until she stood in a landscape of blood-stained earth. Greta felt her own joints beginning to fail, her body buckling until she finally sank into the crimson dirt—just another broken thing finding its place in the mud, in the dark and wet. The earth opened its mouth, and Greta finally stopped fighting the swallow.

The Guide Book

Let's take this opportunity to thank you for consid-ering membership. Henrik approved of membership, so you are given the Membership Handout. In this handout, you will be told about the "do's" and "don'ts.". Your enjoyment depends on how well you can follow these rules.

Do's.

- You will be required to work within or without the gates during the week. All outside work must be supervised.
- You are required to give notice of any sickness or injury. You will be accompanied to the hospital; do not go by yourself.

- You will be required to keep a smile on your face. You must be required to smile on command. It is what we call “maintaining your happy face.”
- Always accompany visits to the city
- After prayer, you will only rise when given the command from a supervisor.

Don’ts.

- Don’t drink alcohol.
- Don’t speak of gods.
- Don’t speak of miracles.
- Don’t clap your hands.
- Don’t eat at places that serve alcohol.
- Don’t speak vulgarities.
- Don’t listen to music.
- Don’t smoke cigarettes.
- Don’t consume drugs.
- Don’t associate with those who consume drugs.
- Don’t watch television without supervision.
- Don’t enter movie theaters.
- Don’t enter erotic movie theaters.
- Don’t own mobile phones that have access to the Internet.
- Don’t read the newspaper unless your supervisor allows you to.
- Don’t read books until you are allowed to do so by your supervisor.
- Don’t walk barefoot in the huts.
- Don’t paint your nails.
- Don’t parallel park.

- Don’t walk by schools.
- Don’t raise your voice when around the farm.
- Don’t close your eyes when singing.
- Don’t bring visitors until the supervisor tells you to.
- Don’t take pictures.
- Don’t put cash into offerings.
- Don’t attend churches outside of the farm.
- Don’t bring or consume chocolate on the grounds.
- Don’t sit cross-legged.
- Don’t let children play with "tools.”.
- Don’t tilt your palms toward the sky.
- Don’t wear anything that is unstitched.
- Don’t ride bikes.
- Don’t start a relationship before checking in with the supervisor.
- Don’t back-talk.
- Don’t give excuses.
- Don’t attack those in authority.
- Don’t question authority.
- Don’t celebrate holidays except ours.
- Don’t talk to people of other faiths.
- Don’t give gifts to others until you are under authority.
- Don’t celebrate Christmas.
- Don’t celebrate Easter.
- Don’t go fishing.

- Don’t wear earrings.
- Don’t wear V-necks
- Don’t wear enticing clothing.
- Don’t imitate an air guitar.
- Don’t whistle.
- Don’t click your tongue.
- Don’t make animal sounds.
- Don’t wear stockings.
- Don’t wear jeans.
- Don’t wear shorts.
- Don’t wear sleeveless tops.
- Don’t wear caps.
- Don’t go swimming.
- Don’t let your hair get too long or short. Check the manual for length.
- Don’t interview for a job unless under authority.
- Don’t buy property without checking in with Ben.
- Don’t buy a car without checking in with Erik first.